



Liftoff to Freedom



Political thought and commentary by Mark F. Sharlow

STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES

What would a truly free society be like? This is one of the most important questions the human mind can ask. We can learn much about freedom by studying today's democracies and the great liberation movements of the past. Among those movements were the American Revolution, the drive to disband the Soviet Union, and the struggle for democracy in many other nations. Liberty has seen many successes, but still we must ask whether today's democratic nations represent the highest possible degree of freedom. Even democracies can suffer under the burden of unnecessary laws and unjust limits on liberty.

Throughout history, political thinkers have proposed blueprints for better societies. This document is such a proposal. It sets forth three principles that, in the author's opinion, would be basic to any *fully* free society. Present-day societies, even admirably free ones, do not follow all of these principles. However, many societies in today's world have made progress in the right directions. The people of the world can work to make societies better, and can hope to realize these three ideals more fully in the future. Nonviolent democratic change is the key to achieving this goal in our time.

We state these three principles here without supporting philosophical arguments, though such arguments can be made. The main argument for these principles is the evidence of personal conscience. Those who love freedom and who detest government cruelty are likely to find these principles reasonable.

Principle 1. Maximum Freedom

The power of the state to compel individual behavior must be limited to the least power possible.

The well-known phrase "government by the people" is the key to the nature of a proper government. The only legitimate powers of governments are powers derived from the people. This means powers derived from the rights of individual people — not from some supposed collective called "the people." For example, you have a right to defend yourself, and every other citizen individually has a similar right of self-defense. Therefore, you and other citizens may hire a police force to defend yourselves. Such a police force would perform a role that individuals justly could perform for themselves, if the individuals were physically able to do so. Governments may justly exercise only those powers that individuals may justly exercise on their own. A government limited to such powers would be a genuine "government by the people."

In a fully free society, free associations among people would carry out many of the roles of today's governments. The most crucial of these functions, from a humanitarian standpoint, is providing help from those in need. This help could come from associations formed and supported by residents of a community, instead of from an inefficient government-run welfare system. Voluntary alliances among people who care are likely to do this important job better than can any government.[1] Also, people who wished to have certain social programs, such as a strong welfare safety net, could form communities that have these programs. Under a limited government, it will be fairly easy to form new voluntary communities with the rules and policies that people want.[2] Note that these two ways of administering programs are not the same as the dangerous, uncertain "privatization" taking place in some countries today. It is unwise to let for-profit business concerns take complete control of vital humanitarian tasks; those businesses were created for other purposes. Voluntary associations and community-based agreements are naturally suited for these tasks, and could do these jobs better.

The view that government power should be as limited as possible is known as *libertarianism*.^[3] The minimal-government position that I am taking here is, in its basics, a standard libertarian position. Contrary to some opinions, libertarianism is not an ideology of unbridled big business, robber barons, and social Darwinism. When put into practice correctly, libertarianism is a philosophy for the liberation of every individual. However, I do not necessarily agree with all the beliefs of organizations that identify themselves as libertarian. There are many different varieties of libertarianism.^[4] The kind I am proposing is, perhaps, the most humane version of libertarianism.

Principle 2. Capitalism for the Individual

In today's world, many people take it for granted that you must be an employee to support yourself. Only a few realize that you are not truly free if you have to ask someone else's permission to support yourself. In present-day societies, most people cannot survive without being given a job by someone else. For most, the only other alternatives are charity, welfare, or starvation. Most of us take this way of life for granted, as if there were no other way. But if you think seriously about it, you will realize that this way of living is an infringement of your freedom. Your possibility of supporting yourself is at the mercy of job markets, which can suddenly discard you and your family into the hell of poverty through no fault of your own. Even the most diligent and dependable employee is not safe.

This economic system is bad for companies as well as for workers. Because of the threat of poverty, many workers have to take jobs that they would not take except out of fear. Thus, companies often end up with workers who have no real interest in their jobs. This situation also causes most of the traditional hostilities between labor and management. Employers would be much better off with employees who chose their jobs willingly.

In a truly free society, everyone would have the power to support himself or herself, if necessary, without working for someone else. Everyone would own private property; everyone would own a privately owned piece of the means of economic production. The people would not own the means of production in a collective way, as they supposedly do under socialism. Instead, each person would own his or her means of subsistence and production. For example, you could own the assets of a one-person business, or enough land to allow survival by farming. People could seek conventional jobs if they wanted to do particular work or to earn more money. (Most people have these wishes; therefore, most people probably would take jobs.) However, no one would have to beg for a job to survive. This system would be pro-people and pro-business at the same time.

The idea of universal economic self-sufficiency forms the basis of the economic line of thought called *distributism* or *distributivism*.^[5] Distributists favor widespread individual ownership of the means of production. On that point, they are right. However, a truly free society need not, and cannot, adopt all the ideas of the distributists. The economic path that I am proposing here is libertarian first, though it shares the distributists' goal of universal self-sufficiency.

Universal self-sufficiency would make real capitalism possible for the first time! In the economies of so-called capitalist countries today, a small rich social stratum owns most of the means of production. Distributist thinkers have pointed out that this system really should not be called capitalism.^[6] Real capitalism begins when everyone is an owner of significant private property, including enough of the means of production to survive.

The ideal way to realize this goal is to ensure that everyone has enough land and other private property to live independently. This would be possible in a society deliberately formed by people who support universal land ownership. Communities of this kind could exist within a libertarian nation. No one would be forced to join such a community, but people could join them voluntarily.^[7] In today's situation, it would be difficult to extend this kind of freedom to everyone. We should strive for this level of freedom, but attaining it will take time. In the mean time, we can pursue a quicker path to universal self-sufficiency: *the deregulation of one-person businesses*. This means abolishing most of the government rules that stand in the way of tiny, one-person businesses. This would make it possible for anyone, no matter how poor, to better his or her lot by starting a very small business — much as immigrants in the early United States started pushcart businesses. To make this change, we would have to abolish most regulatory rules for very small businesses, and bar most civil lawsuits against such businesses. Only the most basic and necessary laws (such as laws against cheating customers or selling bad products) would remain in place. These reforms make up a path to real capitalism, and are natural parts of the libertarian agenda.

Today, some people use "libertarianism" as an excuse for freeing large corporations from the rule of law. This is not what real libertarianism is about. The complete unleashing of big companies could lead to massive oppression of the people and serious environmental destruction. Not all large companies would act that way, but some would. Real libertarianism would begin with deregulation of *one-person* businesses — in other words, the liberation of human beings to support themselves and to forge their own destinies. This would make people free and self-supporting. Later, it would be possible to reduce government regulations for other businesses — but not to the extent of letting those businesses run roughshod over people's rights. (No business of any size, and no individual, has a right to ignore the rights of others through such acts as fraud and intimidation.) Also, the state-created corporations of today could be transformed gradually into companies not created by the state, but operated through systems of contracts. This change, long ago proposed by libertarian economists ^[8], would reduce economic inequality while protecting all legitimate business interests.

When society is libertarian and when individuals and families are self-sufficient, wealth accumulation will become natural and normal. There will be no forced redistribution of anyone's wealth. Although some might become richer than others, no one will have to be extremely poor.

Libertarianism plus universal self-sufficiency equals true capitalism — capitalism for everyone. This true capitalism is better than socialism, and is better than the false capitalism that we have today.

The libertarian ideal in its fullest form can come to pass only if citizens are self-sufficient. Only universal self-sufficiency can ensure that job markets are truly free markets.

Principle 3. The End of Punishment as We Know It

Present-day societies depend on punishment as the primary means of preserving social order. Even in so-called "advanced" societies, many legal punishments are incredibly cruel. Some governments mete out long prison sentences even for minor offenses. Often, prison sentences, and the criminal records associated with them, lead to the end of any hope of a worthwhile future for the person imprisoned. Often these sentences lead to the ruin of the prisoner's entire family. Indeed, the effect of the prison sentence on the prisoner's family is one of the greatest terrors of punishment. This proves that imprisonment is a form of collective vengeance against families; such vengeance always is unjust. Also, the conditions inside prisons, even in "advanced" countries, often are too horrible for nonprisoners to imagine.

A nation that gruesomely destroys human beings to hurt them and their families, or to terrorize future offenders, is not yet a fully civilized nation — no matter how technically or economically developed that nation may be.

Although it may seem radical to say so, governments have no business handing out punishments with the aim of making the offender suffer. The chief *legitimate* aims of criminal justice are: (1) to confine dangerous criminals so they will not pose a threat to society, and (2) to win back offenders to a more honest way of life. These goals sometimes are called *incapacitation* and *rehabilitation*. It is morally permissible for the government to perform these two tasks, because these tasks are simply extensions of people's rights to defend themselves. Incapacitation and rehabilitation are strong enough measures to stop dangerous criminals and to protect people from crime. Retribution and deterrence are not morally acceptable aims for criminal justice.

If we limit the power of criminal justice systems to rehabilitation, combined with confinement of some offenders when necessary to protect the innocent, this will spell the end of punishment as we know it. One could think of the result of this change as a new, constructive type of punishment. However, it would be more accurate to call it the abolition of punishment. People of conscience should strive to replace punishment with a new, positive form of criminal justice centered on rehabilitation.

The belief that punishment should be abolished in favor of constructive, positive measures may be called *antipenalism*.

The Three Keys to True Freedom:

LIBERTARIANISM

UNIVERSAL SELF-SUFFICIENCY

ANTIPENALISM



Notes

[1] For a discussion of this possibility, see David Boaz, *Libertarianism: A Primer* (1st paperback ed.; New York: The Free Press, 1998), chapter 7.

[2] David Boaz makes this suggestion in *Libertarianism: A Primer* (cited in note 1). He suggests (pp. 286-289) that communities with various economic and social systems, including welfare systems, could exist under a libertarian government.

[3] David Boaz's book, *Libertarianism: A Primer*, which I cited in note 1, discusses the subject of libertarianism in an introductory fashion.

[4] My position definitely is *not* the same as the philosophy of Ayn Rand, who mixed up libertarianism with atheism and other irrelevant doctrines. A libertarian does not have to be a follower of Rand, and can be religious or not.

[5] Early key distributist thinkers included G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. By endorsing a few of these authors' ideas, I do not mean to endorse all of their ideas. In particular, I do not agree with the overall conservatism of their teachings.

[6] G.K. Chesterton did this in his book, *The Outline of Sanity* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1927), pp. 5-8.

[7] See note [2] above.

[8] Murray N. Rothbard, *Power and Market* (2nd ed.; Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1977), pp. 79-80.

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