



Document

Technopolitics

# Marketing Freedom

A FEED Document on the limits of libertarianism

For better or worse, Libertarianism is the closest thing the Web has to a home-grown political movement. The publication of Charles Murray's new book, *What It Means to be a Libertarian: A Personal Interpretation*, gives us occasion to reflect on the problems and possibilities of the Libertarian creed. We've invited a panel of critics -- author Paulina Borsook, essayist Ellen Willis, MSNBC's Omar Wasow, and The Wall Street Journal's John Fund -- to annotate passages from the book. As always, we invite FEED readers to send in their own comments, and we'll be included them in the margins of the main Document.

We see this Document as a springboard for a larger, and more free-wheeling conversation, one that extends beyond the FEED site. "Marketing Freedom" is our contribution to the new BrainWave project, a collaboration with Salon, Electric Minds, and The Site. Each publication is hosting a discussion about Libertarianism, and we'll be cross-linking extensively between the various threads. You can see a daily overview of these conversations here.

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## Response

"Right-wing libertarians...don't see that the huge transnational corporations that own and control most of the world's wealth exercise a parallel tyranny," argues Ellen Willis. Read the rest of her response.

## REMOVING GOVERNMENT FROM ECONOMIC LIFE

[One] aspect of freedom is *economic freedom*, which embraces the right to engage in voluntary and informed exchanges of goods and services without restriction. Without economic freedom, freedom of any other kind cannot exist except in a pinched and lifeless way. Thinking otherwise



## Paulina Borsook

In the non-linear, fuzzy-logic, imperfect world I inhabit, it's very nervous-making when folks make absolutist statements about anything -- including the way the world works. So I feel there's a kind of heartening but adolescent simplicity in Murray's *cri de coeur*: would that things really were that easy. At the meta level, *anyone*, whether from the Right or Left, making the claim that if we all just believed X, then all problems would be solved -- is bound to be too caught up in needing to squish facts through his/her cognitive template to see things in all their messy it-aint-necessarily-so complexity.

So *I* can agree with Murray that it would be good to decriminalize recreational drug-use and am all in favor of getting landlords to clean up their crack-houses -- but disagree with the need to buy into his entire fundamentalist package.

In particular, Murray's one-to-one-correlation between economic and other kinds of freedom seems reductive at best (for example, how does Singapore fit into his model, where there is more economic freedom than any other kind?) and pernicious at worst: as always in these discussions, I am reminded of Yeats' "The Second Coming", where the best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity.

Just to address one of those more troublesome bits of missing complexity, while I agree that economics often underlies much of what goes in in human affairs, it doesn't underlie *everything*. People want and do and strive and create and squabble often for reasons that have nothing to do with economic motivators: witness that MFA

programs have proliferated as widely as MBA programs; witness Bosnia (and the student activists, with their wit and courage). Economic freedom as Prime Mover in these and a kazillion other situations is simplistic, off-point and *not* generative.

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## Paulina Borsook

When I met with Political Research Associates' Chip Berlet, a wonderful tracker and analyst of trends on the Far Right heading on into the wacko, we both agreed that while we were much more uncertain about what we felt about entitlement programs, we remained dead certain about the value of regulation.

So for the moment, forget about the admittedly sticky arguments about things such as Social Security: I think most people would consider it a Good Thing that their foodstuffs are labeled as to nutritional analysis and ingredients; their clothing, as to care and contents; their medicines, as to ingredients and side-effects.

And to pick up on only *one* of the obvious problems with Murray's death-wishlist about the fading away of the State: there is no mention *anywhere* about the environment. A friend who has worked as a research scientist for Audubon for years, and who styles himself as a libertarian, has commented that try as he can, he cannot reconcile his preferred political stand with his identity as an ecologist. Though treehugger bumperstickers suggest promoting the right to arm bears, the fact is property rights qua property rights *won't* defend wilderness (pace The Nature Conservancy -- only the Federal Government has the means to hold in trust what remaining wild acreage we still possess). And wilderness has value external to economics, precisely because it is *not* exploited as property. While I am not against market-based solutions to pollution-management, I still think regulation is a better way to go than litigation; once the watershed is messed up, it's messed up. With ecosystems, not only is an ounce of prevention

better than a pound of cure: the pound of cure may not work. Once the habitat is destroyed, it's game-over for that complex bit of the web of life -- and all it affects downstream.

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**Paulina Borsook**

I share Murray's distaste and dismay for the abuses of identity politics and for what's now called Political Correctness (which, as folks seem to have forgotten, is a term which originated -- on the Left -- in the 70s, to make fun of its own reification). Let's just say living in Berkeley for ten years was sufficient, thank you.

That being said, I am glad that the female "New York Times" staffers, who sued the record of the establishment in the early 70s because they had been denied promotion off the girly food'n'fashion pages, had the force of a civil-rights class-action behind them. I am *glad* that African-Americans can now attend Ole Miss, if they so choose, the results of the combined efforts of private activism backed up by the Feds.

And while it makes sense that laws can reflect societal changes that are already taking place, it's also true that laws can offer protection and support. A question: if Murray's own wife or daughter had been passed over for promotion in lieu of some less-qualified *guy*, what he want to do about it? Suppose she had been harassed by a creep at work -- and her line of work (physicist, medical specialist) did not make it easy for her to simply get a job some place else -- or start her own company? What then?

Laws, at their best, are remedies for those situations where Might would ordinarily Make Right; where there may not be any mutually-accepted, privately-agreed upon, contractual arrangement possible.