

Left and Right Against the Empire

When President Obama made his first post-election visit to San Francisco, two groups of protesters met him in Union Square. About 500 activists (the “Left”) carried signs, sang songs and chanted for an end to the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, for environmental action and Medicare for all.

Sharing space with us were about 250 “tea-baggers” (the “Right,”) carrying anti-Obama signs. Their main issues were lower taxes and opposition to “government intervention” in health care.

Both groups were angry. Both agreed that our government is not serving us. Most of us were relatively polite to each other, and despite sharp disagreement on health care and the “stimulus”, we agreed on much. We were all against the wars and the corporate bailouts, and for civil liberties. Why must we see each other as opponents rather than potential allies? In a society run by corporate elites who trample the values of both progressives and traditional conservatives, couldn’t we align Left and Right against the national security state and bankster capitalism?

Scott Horton thinks we can and should. Horton is host of Antiwar Radio, a show heard on [KAOS FM](#) in Austin, Texas and streaming on [Antiwar.com](#). “The left-right political spectrum is the name of our dilemma,” he says. “To end the wars and restore our Bill of Rights we have to find common grounds, not tear each other’s eyes out over cultural and economic things.”

It seems clear the left-right divide is serving the rulers. In response to a question about “Where is all the protest?”, a Common Dreams poster called Henry8 wrote: ““There are plenty of folks objecting. They are simply being dismissed by the left as "mobs" and "Nazi's", with the right dismissing the others as communists, socialists and liberals.”

Started by libertarians, [Antiwar.com](#) features news from around the world on foreign policy, with “the best peaceniks of left and right.” Daniel Ellsberg, Jeremy Scahill, and Glenn Greenwald, Kathy Kelly and Norman Solomon are regular contributors. So are former Reagan official Paul Craig Roberts, Dean Healey of the Cato Institute, and Republican congressman Ron Paul. “We’re making people realize what’s most important and what we have in common,” says Horton. “Our troops should be brought home yesterday. Stop the torture; stop the empire.”

Horton is far from alone in this crusade. Progressive talk radio host [Thom Hartmann](#) approvingly quotes Ross Perot and [Ron Paul](#). Paul and liberal Democrat Alan Grayson [co-sponsored an amendment](#) to audit the Federal Reserve. Socialist Senator Bernie Sanders and Republican Jim DeMint are spearheading the same measure in the Senate.

Libertarians and leftists are also joining forces in the street. Libertarians in Monterrey, California, joined the Peace Coalition of Monterrey County and [organized a demonstration](#) against the occupation of Afghanistan. We haven’t seen any tea-baggers

at these protests yet, but why not reach out to them? The empire is the antithesis of the small government they claim to believe in.

In the electoral arena, a group of libertarians and progressives has formed a PAC called [Strange Bedfellows](#) to support candidates running against Blue Dog Democrats and other war supporters.

Diverse American forces have allied against empire before. In 1898, leaders from Andrew Carnegie to Jane Addams and Samuel Gompers joined [Mark Twain](#) in forming the [American Anti-Imperialist League](#) to oppose the annexation of the Philippines.

According to the [Alliance of the Libertarian Left](#), we should perhaps stop looking at the battle against gangster capitalism as being solely a “Left” project. One can oppose capitalism from a socialist perspective, but also from a free market perspective, because capitalism destroys free markets.

Citing Ralph Nader, Horton says, “Our problem in the U.S. is a combination of elite private power and the public power of the state. It’s not business in and of itself; it’s business’ control of Congress and the amount of influence they are able to exercise, for example, the bailout. Libertarians and leftists agreed that banks should have been allowed to fail – banks shouldn’t be allowed to socialize their costs onto the working people and middle-class people. A lot of conservatives see this clearly also.”

In fact, street [demonstrations against the Fed](#) have included Ron Paul libertarians and New Way Forward progressives. It’s the combination of private and public power that makes capitalism such a monster – the capitalists’ ability to call in government power to suppress a strike, say, or start a war or transfer trillions of dollars to their mega-banks.

Seeing Things Differently, Fighting Together

Historically, the Left’s prime values have been justice, equality, and cooperation. The honest Right’s prime values are freedom and independence. (I’m not talking about the corporate Fox News “right.” They have no values.) Our differences in values explain the conflict about something like universal health care. The Left sees it as promoting equality and supporting those who need help. The Right sees it as an infringement on people’s independence. I don’t share their values, but it’s important to recognize that they are legitimate.

The corporate oligarchs are destroying the values of both Left and Right. They are against justice, equality, and social security, and they are also against freedom, independence, and peace, which nearly everyone wants. So a left/right coalition at least starts with a common enemy. We have serious disagreements, of course, but perhaps these can be overcome.

Reaching Out

How can Leftists, Greens and other progressives ally with libertarians and honest conservatives? How can one group interact productively with the other? Horton says, “Attack the Right from the right. How can a conservative be for unlimited nationalism and abandoning the rule of law and unlimited budgets? Show them they are being inconsistent with their own beliefs.” At the San Francisco rally and at tea-bagger events, I have found few people supporting the occupations. They might say something like, “We can’t leave now,” but they aren’t happy about it, and they are open to talking about it. That’s a place to start.

One commenter on antiwar.com said, “Approach [grass-roots conservatives] in the language of freedom.” The empire is taking away American freedoms and the freedoms of those it attacks. The war on drugs is an assault on freedom; the war on terror is an assault on freedom. Handing the keys to the Treasury to Goldman Sachs is an assault on economic freedom.

Yes, there are difference between Left and Right. But they don’t include the most important issues – stopping the empire, restoring civil liberties, and breaking the mega-banks’ hold on the economy. We all agree on those.

Can we get off the left/right continuum? As Scott Horton asks, “Instead of liberals vs. conservatives, wouldn’t it be better to have it be torturers, imperialists and liars vs. the peace and freedom party? We can argue about gay marriage and Medicare later.”

If we’re willing to reach out to conservatives and ally with libertarians, they are not hard to find. If we focus on the issues that unite us, maybe we can build a movement against the empire. What is more important than that?