



From Meager Means to Market Anarchism: The Political Evolution of an Ordinary Swede

Per L. Bylund

They say it usually begins with Ayn Rand. That was not my case.

I grew up outside of Stockholm, Sweden, in a home that was in every sense but the formal definition *working class*. My father was a car mechanic who had shifted gears to become a social worker. My mother had been a schoolteacher, but she left her job to stay at home with me and my younger brothers. My parents were probably among the very last with normal and low incomes to be able to do this. Sweden had already adopted policies intended to expand the workforce beyond what immigration could accomplish, which meant “incentivizing” women to have careers by making it near impossible to have a family with only one income. My parents’ decision, financially speaking, turned out to be nothing short of a disaster. They were barely able to make ends meet throughout my childhood and adolescence.

P. L. Bylund (✉)

Spears School of Business, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK, USA
e-mail: per.bylund@okstate.edu

The reason the family stayed afloat was that my father took on several odd jobs nights and weekends and my mother similarly worked on paid projects from home. No, those incomes were not always reported and taxed. In retrospect, that was probably part of why they could make it work—along with doing practically everything ourselves. My father patched our old house and fixed our beat-up cars; my mother sewed our clothes, baked our bread, and cut our hair to avoid those expenses.

As a child, however, our meager means were not very noticeable to me. At least, not beyond the not-so-fun comparisons with friends and classmates, who went on travels with their families and had all the cool toys and brand clothing. Those frustrations notwithstanding, I had a very happy childhood. My parents provided a stable, safe, and supportive home. Do I not wish we had had more money? Yes, because it would have lessened the burden on my parents. But I don't think more money would have made my upbringing any better.

I share my background for two reasons. First, this is an autobiographical note, so you probably expected it. Second, and more importantly, I want to challenge the unfounded caricature that libertarians come from wealthy backgrounds. Libertarianism has nothing to do with having money; it has only to do with freedom as a fundamentally egalitarian individual right. In my view, libertarianism is a much better fit for people of meager means than the statist ideologies that claim to represent them. So my finding libertarianism is not an exception.

But I wasn't born libertarian. I gradually warmed up to the idea of freedom and all the uncertainty and responsibility that necessarily comes with it. In my experience, the trouble with adopting a libertarian worldview is, much as it was for me, that it is very difficult to let go of the idea that there can be guarantees. The state's *raison d'être* is the impossible promise to offer such guarantees. Even though the state rather consistently fails to deliver on them, many choose to believe in the promises nonetheless.

My political awakening started in middle school because I had friends who were politically engaged. They were on both the left and the right, but the latter were the majority. I listened but I cannot recall identifying with either side.

In the fall of 1991, my first semester of high school, Sweden held a general election—the first one for decades in which the social democratic party risked losing (they lost). It was also the end of the radical period of the Swedish welfare state, which had managed in merely two decades to

run into the ground what was in 1970 the fourth richest country in the world. At the time, I was largely unaware of this.

Before the election, I encountered a flyer from the Swedish party Moderaterna's youth league in my locker. I filled out the enclosed membership form to join, as did a couple of my friends. Why did I seek membership? I'm not sure. I soon started going to meetings. One of the first I went to was an introductory course in ideology. It covered the ideals behind the Moderaterna's program, which is based on an awkward mix of classical liberalism and (European) conservatism. I quickly and ignorantly adopted a middle-ground position but leaned toward conservative in symbolic issues. I can truthfully say that my opinions on those issues were based purely on emotion and ignorance. The classical liberals in the party had all kinds of crazy views, to which I was increasingly exposed. They were difficult to argue against because they relied on logical arguments which I could not properly counter.

This is where my journey toward libertarianism started picking up speed. I intuitively liked the concept of freedom and increasingly appreciated logical consistency, so I soon started thinking systematically about my own opinions. This brought about a pivot from semi-conservative to classical liberal, fomented by spending my third year of college abroad. Being a serious student, I took the opportunity to spend two semesters at Hawai'i Pacific University (HPU) in downtown Honolulu. By chance, I ended up taking two courses in economics with Ken Schoolland in the fall of 1996. Ken's teaching on how markets and regulations work quickly helped me do away with any doubts I had about free markets.

Returning to Sweden and Jönköping University, where I studied business and computer science, I became a member of Fria Moderata Studentförbundet (FMSF), which is basically a non-partisan national debate club for students of classical liberal and conservative conviction who like to discuss ideas freely without policy concerns. In the debates, both online and in person, I became ever more hardcore in my classical liberal ideas. And I read lots of books by libertarians such as Robert Nozick, Ayn Rand, and Murray N. Rothbard. They were helpful, but one question remained to be answered: how to abolish the state. That it had to go was obvious to me, but I could not figure out the "how" of a stateless society. I was looking for guarantees.

In the September 1998 election I was a candidate for municipal council in my native Österåker for the Moderaterna, dedicated to pushing local policy in the direction of freedom. I campaigned during the day with a

dear friend of similar conviction, and we spent the evenings discussing the prospect of abolishing the state. We were convinced society does not need, and ought not to be based on, a monopoly on violence, but how might it work? We drafted different systems for a stateless but ordered society, but without coming up with a good solution. We could not figure out how to guarantee that people's rights were protected.

I finally left my remaining traces of statism on the wayside that fall after someone recommended that I read David D. Friedman's *Machinery of Freedom*. Its effect on my thinking was profound because it so simply and straightforwardly did away with the state. What an idiot I had been drafting all those systems!

So here I was, a newborn anarchist being elected to the municipal council. I did not quite fit in. I tried playing the game to get things moving in the "right direction," but the political system is biased against freedom—it is about power. If you believe politics could be a way to increase or reintroduce freedom, or even resist the expansion of the state, you are sorely mistaken.

All I accomplished while in office was making enemies, being ridiculed publicly as well as in the media, and being bullied by older establishment politicians. I resigned loudly and in protest in 2000 and left all of party politics behind. (No, I'm not going back.) But this was hardly the end of my story, but rather the beginning of my life as a radical anti-politics anarchist libertarian.

Being very active in the Swedish libertarian movement's handful of organizations in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I had gained somewhat of a reputation as "the anarchist." I was hardly the only one, but one of the few who were open and vocal about it. This turned out to be important: when people engage in open debate and clearly state their radical ideals, people get exposed to those ideas. Much as I had been exposed to the crazy ideas of the classical liberals. This helped spawn an anarcho-libertarian movement in Sweden that is still going strong. I would like to think that I played some part in the very beginning by getting the ball rolling.

While still in politics, I had co-founded the website Anarchism.net in 1999, which I ran for several years. The site, written entirely in English, was one of the very first gathering places for libertarian anarchists online and its discussion forum attracted hundreds of people eager to debate these ideas daily. (That was a lot back then.) It was with Anarchism.net that I started writing in English and I soon contributed to a large

number of websites, primarily strike-the-root.com, lewrockwell.com, and mises.org, publishing well over 200 columns my most productive year in the early 2000s.

This also exposed me to criticism, which in turn introduced to me new perspectives. I grew increasingly fond of individualist anarchism and the “leftist” take on freedom. The structures that oppress people primarily oppress those of meager means or who are otherwise marginalized, which is why the quest for freedom is a quest for justice. The main culprit and oppressor is the State, but also those who collaborate with and benefit from it: large corporations, monopolists, the rich, and the political class. Abolishing the State means abolishing privilege; it means smashing the very structures of oppression that hold many down while lifting others up.

I thus moved Anarchism.net away from its prior focus on anarcho-capitalism, which was growing increasingly common online, and in the direction of “anarchism without adjectives.” The new aim was to produce a gathering place for all anarchists to discuss principles and strategy. It wasn’t very successful; too many anarchists are more interested in flying their tribal colors than in making real change. Anarchists on the left/right spend more time denouncing everything they dislike as capitalism/socialism than discussing the nature of freedom and strategies for attaining it.

My conviction was (and is) that a strategy for freedom cannot require political power, which is its very antithesis. I found and adopted Konkin’s *countereconomics*, which is a beautifully simple and effective prescription that is both individualist, voluntary, and productive. It uses, creates, and enforces individual freedom through market action. It is value creation on people’s own terms. In other words, the very opposite of politics.

Countereconomics is the intentional shifting of one’s actions from the destructive to the productive realm. It is as much about seeking opportunities for mutual gain, and partners to produce and share in that gain, as it is about moving beyond the realm of (and thus out of reach of) the State. In a sense, it is true entrepreneurship: find how to serve others to thereby serve yourself. And, as formalized in countereconomics, do so without feeding the beast.

As I later started studying economics and entrepreneurship in greater depth, including formally between 2007 and 2012 as a graduate student at the University of Missouri under the guidance of Peter G. Klein, the

simplistic beauty of the free market—also as a strategy for freedom—became ever clearer to me. It is not only productive and value-creative, a strategy for freedom, but deeply moral. As a truly free society is.

What does Ayn Rand have to do with all this? Not much, I'm afraid. I certainly read and was influenced by her writings, both fiction and philosophy, in the 1990s. But I quickly moved beyond the teachings of objectivism to follow the principle of individual liberty to its ultimate conclusion: market anarchism. The state is, after all, the very negation of freedom, peace, and prosperity. Even Rand struggled to come up with a defense of the state, however small.