
OBSERVATIONS

Freedom Fetishists

Kay S. Hymowitz

MORE THAN perhaps any other American political group, libertarians have suffered the blows of caricature. For many people, the term evokes an image of a scraggly misfit living in the woods with his gun collection, a few marijuana plants, some dog-eared Ayn Rand titles, and a battered pick-up truck plastered with bumper stickers reading “Taxes = Theft” and “FDR Was A Pinko.”

The stereotype is not entirely unfair. Even some of those who proudly call themselves libertarians recognize that their philosophy of personal freedom and minimal government can be a powerful magnet for the unhinged. Nor has recent political history done much to rehabilitate libertarianism’s image as an outlier.

The Libertarian party’s paltry membership has never reached much beyond the 250,000 mark, and polling numbers for Ron Paul, the perennial libertarian presidential candidate (now running for the

Republican nomination), remain pitiable. Worse, despite Bill Clinton’s declaration that “the era of big government is over,” anti-statist ideas like school vouchers and privatized Social Security accounts continue to be greeted with widespread skepticism, while massive new programs like the Medicare prescription-drug benefit continue to win the support of reelection-minded incumbents. A recent *New York Times* survey found increasing support for government-run health care, and both parties are showing signs of a populist resurgence, with demands for new economic and trade regulation.

And yet, judging by their output in recent years, libertarians are in a fine mood—and not because they are in denial. However distant the country may be from their laissez-faire ideal, free-market principles now drive the American economy to a degree unimaginable a generation ago. Former Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan, who as a young economist sat at the knee of the libertarian guru Ayn Rand, presided in the 1990’s over one of the most prosperous stretches in American history, with the support,

no less, of a Democratic President. When the avowedly libertarian economist Milton Friedman died last November, he was lauded just about everywhere, and even given respectful treatment in places like the *New York Review of Books*.

Nor have libertarian victories been limited to the economic arena. Americans are increasingly laissez-faire in their attitudes toward sex, divorce, drugs, and gay marriage. In the personal sphere as in the world of business and finance, freedom has become the guiding principle, especially for the young. As the motto of *Reason* magazine, the movement’s flagship publication, trumpets: “Free minds and free markets.”

The diverse origins of libertarianism and its recent accomplishments are the subjects, respectively, of two new books by capable advocates of the creed. *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement** by Brian Doherty is (as its subtitle suggests) an appreciation of even the most gnarled branches of the ideological family tree. Brink Lindsey’s *The Age of Abundance:*

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*How Prosperity Transformed America's Politics and Culture** is, by contrast, a broad survey of the social and cultural changes sparked by the free market's triumph in postwar America. Perhaps because of their differences, however, the two books are neatly complementary. Together they make clear why libertarianism has yet to find a secure place in the American mainstream.

ANEMIC THOUGH its following has been over the years, libertarianism is a quintessentially American philosophy. As Doherty, a senior editor at *Reason*, writes in his massive, lively history, "Libertarianism is all in Jefferson. Read your Declaration of Independence." For Jefferson, citizens are the bearers of inalienable rights, and the purpose of government is to protect those rights. Libertarians see this bargain as the essence of public life—and any departure from it, especially in the name of some grander idea of justice, as a violation of the social compact. Among the many colorful libertarian trailblazers described by Doherty is Lysander Spooner, a 19th-century radical who compared the government to a highwayman pointing a gun at your head and demanding "your money or your life." Spooner poured his energies into establishing a privately run postal service (a project still dear to many libertarians).

Closer to our own day, the decisive influences on libertarianism were the free-market economists Ludwig von Mises (1881-1973) and his disciple Friedrich Hayek (1899-1992). Though both were Austrian by birth and education, they eventually landed in America, where they continued to develop their powerful (and now vindicated) critique of socialist economics. As Doherty emphasizes, both thinkers rejected central planning largely on the grounds that human beings are not very good at predicting the future. Socialism was bound to fail, they argued, because it did not take

into account the evolving preferences (or "subjective valuations") of individuals. It was a grossly inefficient, necessarily coercive system for meeting human needs.

Doherty disabuses readers of the idea that libertarianism is exclusively concerned with economics. As he emphasizes, it has a political and moral dimension as well, "a vision of a radical and just future." According to many of the thinkers he profiles, liberty is essential to the initiative and self-sufficiency that make ethical behavior possible. Doherty devotes considerable attention, for example, to the mid-20th-century anarchist Murray Rothbard, sometimes called "Mr. Libertarian." Rothbard was one of the first observers to stress the now-familiar point that government action on behalf of the poor and minorities would undermine the responsibility and self-discipline they needed for advancement.

Many of the figures described by Doherty believe that libertarianism is also good for the social fabric. Capitalism may not lead to the *fraternité* naively dreamed of by more conventional revolutionaries, but it does expand the circle of human trust beyond the traditional limits of family and tribe; social bonds thrive in an atmosphere of freedom. Indeed, several of Doherty's subjects (particularly Hayek) argue that government meddling positively discourages the human instinct for association. If politicians and bureaucrats would get out of the way, people would more readily cooperate and support one another. As David Friedman (the anarchist son of Milton) concluded in studying the economics of tipping, people are capable of developing their own rules for distributive justice, and will pay for social goods of their own free will.

FOR BRINK LINDSEY, the vice president for research at the Cato Institute, Americans today are the fortunate heirs of Mises and Hayek.

Since World War II, he argues in *The Age of Abundance*, the libertarian principles of competition, free trade, and deregulation have given the United States a level of prosperity that would have astounded our ancestors. For most of human history (and, even now, for much of the developing world), the lot of ordinary people has been scarcity, brutal work, and lives cut short by ill health. No more—thanks to the bounty of modern capitalism.

As Lindsey writes, Americans "live on the far side of a great fault line." On one (now distant) side, there were polio, diphtheria, outhouses, child labor, candlepower, life expectancy of under 50 years, sweatshops, and the Great Depression. On our blessed, present-day side, there are miracle drugs, hip replacements, peaches from Chile in winter, Russian caviar in the summer, central air-conditioning, 500 TV channels, master bathrooms with whirlpools, and Dow 14,000. Marx predicted that civilization would travel from the "realm of necessity" to the "realm of freedom" (the title of Lindsey's first chapter). About that much, he was right—but the engine has been bourgeois capitalism, not class struggle.

To critics who say that the market is a nasty rogue, supplying the fortunate with mansions and Cristal Brut while condemning the luckless to rags and scraps, Lindsey gives no ground. America's late-19th-century Gilded Age, frequently described by the economically naive as an example of "unbridled capitalism," was anything but that. The "robber barons," he writes, were little more than crony capitalists, insiders who manipulated government to squelch competition and keep themselves flush. By contrast, the more authentic free-market practices of the past several decades, Lindsey argues, have improved the material lives not just of millionaires but of deliverymen, waitresses, and teachers.

As for today's poor, they are less

* Harper Collins, 394 pp., \$26.95.

likely to suffer from hunger than from obesity, and they are able to afford such luxuries as cable television, washers and dryers, microwaves, and cell phones primarily because of deregulated global markets. Instead of laboring in dangerous mines or steel mills, less skilled workers are security guards or restaurant workers. Such jobs are not exactly easy street, but they beat getting black-lung disease or third-degree burns.

LINDSEY GOES well beyond most libertarians in his claims for the moral benefits of the creed. In his view, it is not simply freedom that improves morals; it is the prosperity that follows in freedom's wake. Wealth allows us to transcend "the cruel dilemma of lifeboat ethics," in which scarcity prevails. Moreover, wealth expands human tolerance and imagination. Drawing upon the psychologist Abraham Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs, Lindsey proposes that once people are confident of their survival and comfort, they feel free to pursue "postmaterialist values." They have the time, energy, and ease of mind to try to perfect themselves.

As a practical matter, this means that Americans no longer just take jobs to support their families; they look for meaningful work. They do not just marry the girl next door; they search for their soulmates. They do not just sink quietly into flabby middle age; they jog, go on yoga retreats in Costa Rica, and stock their bedrooms with Viagra and vibrators. *Playboy*, the decline of the Victorian paterfamilias, permissive childrearing, feminism, the sexual revolution, the fitness boom, gay rights, and even the civil-rights revolution—all, in Lindsey's view, are logical outcomes of the age of abundance. The expanding marketplace has unleashed individual desire from traditional constraints in favor of an "ethos of self-realization and personal fulfillment."

Is Lindsey, then, just one more defender of everything that falls un-

der the rubric of "the Sixties"? Not exactly. He has read his Max Weber and knows that middle-class norms are the indispensable cultural infrastructure of free-market economics; he appreciates the irony that, without Protestant self-discipline and respectability, Americans would not be enjoying their Napa Chardonnay and Internet porn. He thus condemns "the wild overshooting of the Aquarian Left," which (in addition to despising capitalism) "trashed . . . legitimate authority and necessary restraints." Indeed, in his view, the rise of the religious Right was a predictable, and to some extent even salutary, response to the excesses of the 60's.

Fortunately, by the 1990's, Lindsey contends, Americans had found a middle ground between the antinomianism of the Aquarian Left and the pinched moralizing of the Moral Majority. As he wrote recently in an online discussion of his book:

It turned out that the American Dream retained its vitality even in an age of abundance, because Americans still wanted more—more comforts, more conveniences, more opportunities, and more challenges, all of which were best provided through continued economic development. The strength of this desire, and not the fading hold of old cultural forms, provided the basis for ongoing commitment to middle-class self-restraint—self-restraint as a means to exuberant self-expression.

Americans, in Lindsey's view, have reached a noble synthesis. They are tolerant, open-minded, inclusive—and enthusiastic practitioners of free enterprise. "The culture wars are over," he concludes, "and capitalism won."

AT A TIME when many others in the big tent of American conservatism are in the dumps, such upbeat assessments are rare. Doherty and Lindsey are positively Reaganesque

in their optimism, and the movement of which they are a part has undoubtedly made a real contribution to the policy debate in recent years. Lindsey's Cato Institute, the premier think tank of libertarianism, continues to publish its valuable free-market reports and books. Libertarian bloggers have established a substantial readership, and a number of them, like Glenn Reynolds of Instapundit and the law professors who write the *Volokh Conspiracy*, have become prominent (and notably sane) voices in the world of online political commentary.

More important perhaps, today's libertarian movement has been open to the sort of internal disagreements that are a sign of a healthy, maturing philosophy. Differences over the Iraq war are a striking example. Historically, libertarians have been programmatically antiwar, in part because of their opposition to coercion in all its forms but also because war increases the power and reach of the state. Today, by contrast, a number of libertarians, including the Georgetown law professor Randy Barnett in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, make the case for more flexible thinking about dealing with the threat of Islamism, and some have been supporters of the Bush administration's efforts in Iraq.

Even on social and cultural questions, where libertarians have often tangled with tradition-minded conservatives, Lindsey is on to something in his talk of a "libertarian synthesis" combining self-expression and self-restraint. If the country was slouching toward Gomorrah for a while, it has at the very least straightened up a bit. Many of the indicators of social meltdown that received alarmed attention in the 1980's and early 90's—high crime rates, "children having children," teen drug use, rampant divorce—have improved lately.

BUT THEY have not improved nearly as much as one might wish—and it is difficult to separate the reasons

for our abiding social disarray from the trends that Doherty and Lindsey praise and for which libertarians bear a measure of responsibility. Despite Lindsey's protestations to the contrary, libertarianism has supported, always implicitly and often with an enthusiastic hurrah, the "Aquarian" excesses that he now decries. Many of the movement's devotees were deeply involved in the radicalism of the 1960's.

Nor should this come as a surprise. After all, the libertarian vision of personal morality—described by Doherty as "[P]eople ought to be free to do whatever the hell they want, mostly, as long as they aren't hurting anyone else"—is not far removed from "if it feels good, do it," the *cri de coeur* of the Aquarians. To be sure, part of the libertarian entanglement with the radicalism of the 1960's stemmed from the movement's opposition to both the Vietnam war and the draft, which Milton Friedman likened to slavery. But libertarians were also drawn to the Left's revolutionary social posture.

Murray Rothbard, for example, became a fan of Che Guevara and the Black Panther leader H. Rap Brown. Karl Hess, a libertarian/anarchist said to have written Barry Goldwater's famous lines about "extremism in the defense of liberty," was an equal-opportunity revolutionary; during the 60's, he symbolized his move to the New Left by donning a Castro-style beard and jacket. And many young libertarians spent the decade moving back and forth between the right-wing Young Americans for Freedom and the left-wing Students for a Democratic Society.

The point in rehearsing this history is not to play gotcha; many good people did and thought things during those days that they would prefer not to remember (assuming, as the joke has it, they *can* remember). Rather, it is to suggest that, when one's moral compass consists of nothing more than doing "whatever the hell you want" and avoid-

ing physical harm to anyone else's person or property, it is very easy to get lost.

The civil-rights movement is an instructive case. Lindsey includes it in his list of libertarian victories, but it is a perfect example of the inability of libertarians to find a political and moral framework suitable to the big questions of American public life. If people ought to be able to do what they want, then certainly hating blacks—either by oneself or in the company of like-minded souls—is nobody else's business, including the federal government's. To the extent that libertarians are remembered at all for their role in the civil-rights era, it is not for marching on Selma but rather for their enthusiastic support of states' rights and the freedom of white racists to associate with one another.

Libertarianism was complicit, too, in the vociferous attack during the 1960's on the bourgeois family. After all, blood relationships are involuntary, and parents with any interest in rearing and educating their children are unlikely to look for guidance in *Atlas Shrugged*. Ayn Rand was predictably wary of kinship ties and, like radical feminists, saw the family as a soul-killing prison. Rothbard struggled with the vexing question of how to square the biological fact of the dependency of the young with the libertarian devotion to freedom. His conclusion was that parents should not be legally bound to feed or educate their children, and children should have an absolute right to leave home at any time. Today, libertarians support the loosest of divorce laws, and many wonder why the state should be involved in the marriage business at all, a question that has come to the fore in the debate over gay marriage.

As a common-sense moderate, Brink Lindsey implicitly rejects such radical views of personal autonomy while at the same time dismissing their ill effects. "A strong work ethic and belief in personal responsibility, a continued commitment to

the two-parent family as the best way of raising children, and a robust patriotism," he writes, "all survived the Aquarian challenge." But this assessment is far too sanguine. Today, a record 37 percent of American children are born to single mothers, and the number appears to be on the rise. Most of these children will be either poor or very limited in their ability to move up the economic ladder.

Lindsey must know this, but to dwell on it would cast a shadow over the sunny prospect he describes. Worse, it would compel him to confront what we might call the cultural contradictions of libertarianism.

ON THE ONE hand, libertarians make a fetish of freedom; it is their totalizing goal. On the other hand, libertarians depend on the family—an institution that, in crucial respects, is unfree—to produce the sort of people best suited to life in a free-market system (not to mention future members of their own movement). The complex, dynamic economy that libertarians have done so much to expand needs highly advanced human capital—that is, individuals of great moral, cognitive, and emotional sophistication. Reams of social-science research prove that these qualities are best produced in traditional families with married parents.

Family breakdown, by contrast, limits the accumulation of such human capital. Worse, divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing leave the door wide open for big government. Dysfunctional families create an increased demand for state-funded food, housing, and medical subsidies, which libertarians reject on principle. And in courts all over the country, judges who preside over the manifold disputes occasioned by broken families are forced to be more intrusive than the worst mother-in-law: they decide who should have primary custody, who gets a child on Christmas or summer holidays, whether a child should take

piano lessons, go to Hebrew school, move to California, or speak to her grandmother on the phone. It is a libertarian's worst nightmare.

A libertarian, according to Brian Doherty, "has to believe" that "the instincts and abilities for liberty . . . are innate," that we possess "an ability to fend for ourselves in the Randian sense and to form spontaneous orders of fellowship and cooperation in the Hayekian sense." But this view of the relationship between the individual and society is profoundly and demonstrably false, especially when applied to the family.

Children do not come into the world respecting private property. They do not emerge from the womb ready to navigate the economic and moral complexities of an "age of abundance." The only way they learn such things is through a long process of intensive socialization—a process that we now know, thanks to the failed experiments begun by the Aquarians and implicitly supported by libertarians, usually requires intact families and decent schools.

LIBERTARIANISM did not have to take this unfortunate turn. Ludwig von Mises himself warned that the attempt (of socialists) to undermine the family was a ploy to strengthen the state. Hayek, too, grasped the family's role in upholding the free market. Coming of age in Europe around the time of World War I, he stressed the state's inefficiency but also warned, more generally, of the limits of human reason. "Hayek's economics was rooted in man's ignorance," Doherty writes; so were his political views, which included both an enthusiasm for freedom and a Burkean respect for customs and institutions.

It is difficult to say why this aspect of libertarianism has faded away, but the sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset once provided a partial answer. In Europe and elsewhere, he observed, modern radicals have tended to be of a Marxist, collectivist bent; in America, with its peculiar Lockean legacy and Jeffersonian ideals, radicals have gone to the other extreme, searching for absolute freedom. It is a quest that

has left little room for the confining demands of family and other unchosen social bonds.

Libertarians come in many flavors, of course, but they share certain enthusiasms beyond free-market economics. They are often great consumers of science fiction, with an avid interest in space travel. And they have an almost unlimited enthusiasm for biotechnology, especially for advances that might allow us to manipulate our natures and extend our lives. Taken together, these elements constitute what might be called the libertarian dream—the dream of shaping your own meaning, liberated from family, from the past, from tradition, from biology, and perhaps even from the earth itself.

Such utopian ambitions are difficult to satisfy or even contain in the mundane world of American politics. For some time to come, they are likely to make libertarianism the natural home of assorted cranks and crazies, and thus to continue to provide fodder for its at least partly deserved caricature.