

A DISPASSIONATE ASSESSMENT OF LIBERTARIANS

by Russell Kirk

The term "libertarianism" is distasteful to people who think seriously about politics. Both Dr. F.A. Hayek and your servant have gone out of their way, from time to time, to declare that they refuse to be tagged with this label. Anyone much influenced by the thought of Edmund Burke and of Alexis de Tocqueville — as are both Professor Hayek and this commentator — sets his face against ideology; and libertarianism is a simplistic ideology, relished by one variety of the folk whom Jacob Burckhardt called "the terrible simplifiers."

Nevertheless, I have something to say favorable to today's libertarians in the United States; later I shall dwell upon their vices. With your indulgence, I mean to make three points about persons calling themselves libertarians, which may warm the cockles of their rebellious hearts.

First, a number of the men and women who accept the label "libertarian" are not actually ideological libertarians at all, but simply conservatives under another name. These are people who perceive in the growth of the monolithic state, especially during the past half century, a grim menace to ordered liberty; and of course they are quite right. They wish to emphasize their attachment to personal and civic freedom by employing this 20th century word derived from liberty. With them I have little quarrel — except that by so denominating themselves, they seem to countenance a crowd of political fantasics who "license they mean, when they cry liberty."

Descendants of Classical Liberals. For if a man believes in an enduring moral order, the Constitution of the United States, established American way of life, and a free economy — why, actually he is a conservative, even if he labors under an imperfect understanding of the general terms of politics. Such Americans are to the conservative movement in the United States much as the Liberal Unionists have been to the Conservative Party in Britain — that is, close practical allies, almost indistinguishable nowadays. Libertarians of this description usually are intellectual descendants of the old "classical liberals"; they make common cause with regular conservatives against the menace of democratic despotism and economic collectivism.

Second, the libertarians generally — both the folk of whom I have just approved, and also the ideological libertarians — try to exert some check upon vainglorious foreign policy. They do not believe that the United States should station garrisons throughout the world; no more do I; in some respects, the more moderate among them have the understanding of foreign policy that the elder Robert Taft represented. Others among them, however, seem

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to labor under the illusion that communist ideology can be dissipated by trade agreements — a notion really fatuous. I lack time to labor this point here; I mean to take it up again in my autumn lecture on the neoconservatives, who in foreign policy tend toward an opposite extreme. Let it suffice for the present for me to declare that so far as the libertarians set their faces against a policy of American domination worldwide — why, I am with them. I part with them when they forget that the American government nowadays, in Burke's phrase of two centuries ago, is "combating an armed doctrine," not merely a national adversary.

Perils of Centralization. Third, most of the libertarians believe in the humane scale: they vehemently oppose what my old friend Wilhelm Roepke called "the cult of the colossal." They take up the cause of the self-reliant individual, the voluntary association, the just rewards of personal achievement. They know the perils of political centralization. In an age when many folks are ready — nay, eager — to exchange their independence for "entitlements," the libertarians exhort us to stand on our own feet, manfully.

In short, the libertarians' propaganda, which abounds, does touch upon real social afflictions of our time, particularly repression of vigorous and aspiring natures by centralized political structures and by the enforcement of egalitarian doctrines. Rather curiously, libertarian publications have been widely circulated in Poland — apparently with no concerted effort by the communist government to prevent their introduction. (One may suspect, in this instance, that the eagerness of certain libertarian organizations for cordial relations between the West and the Soviet Union induces some toleration by the squalid oligarchies of the East.) With reason, many people are discontented with the human condition, in many lands, near the end of the 20th century; the more intelligent among the discontented look about for some seemingly logical alternative to present dominations and powers; and some of those discontented — the sort of people who went out to David in the Cave of Adullam — discover libertarian dogmata and become enthusiasts, at least temporarily, for the ideology called libertarianism.

Inadequacies and Extravagances. I say temporarily: for an initial fondness for libertarian slogans frequently has led young men and women to the conservative camp. Not a few of the people who have studied closely with me or who have become my assistants had been attracted, a few years earlier, to the arguments of Ayn Rand or of Murray Rothbard. But as they read more widely, they had become conscious of the inadequacies and extravagances of the various libertarian factions; as they had begun to pay serious attention to our present political difficulties, they had seen how impractical are the libertarian proposals. Thus they had found their way to conservative realism, which proclaims that politics is the art of the possible. Therefore it may be said of libertarianism, in friendly fashion, that often it has been a recruiting office for young conservatives, even though the libertarians had not the least intention of shoring up belief in custom, convention, and the politics of prescription.

There. I have endeavored to give the libertarians their due. Now let me turn to their failings, which are many and grave.

For the ideological libertarians are not conservatives in any true meaning of that term of politics; nor do the more candid libertarians desire to be called conservatives. On the contrary, they are radical doctrinaires, contemptuous of our inheritance from our ancestors.

They rejoice in the radicalism of Tom Paine; they even applaud those 17th century radicals, the Levellers and the Diggers, who would have pulled down all the land-boundaries, and pulled down, too, the whole framework of church and state. The libertarian groups differ on some points among themselves, and exhibit varying degrees of fervor. But one may say of them in general that they are "philosophical" anarchists in bourgeois dress. Of society's old institutions, they would retain only private property. They seek an abstract Liberty that never has existed in any civilization — nor, for that matter, among any barbarous people, or any savage. They would sweep away political government; in this, they subscribe to Marx's notion of the withering away of the state.

Cooperation Aids Prosperity. One trouble with this primitive understanding of freedom is that it could not possibly work in 20th century America. The American Republic, and the American industrial and commercial system, require the highest degree of cooperation that any civilization ever has known. We prosper because most of the time we work together — and are restrained from our appetites and passions, to some extent, by laws enforced by the state. We need to limit the state's powers, of course, and our national Constitution does that — if not perfectly, at least more effectively than does any other national constitution.

The Constitution of the United States distinctly is not an exercise of libertarianism. It was drawn up by an aristocratic body of men who sought "a more perfect union." The delegates to the Constitutional Convention had a wholesome dread of the libertarians of 1786-1787, as represented by the rebels who followed Daniel Shays in Massachusetts. What the Constitution established was a higher degree of order and prosperity, not an anarchists' paradise. So it is somewhat amusing to find some old gentlemen and old ladies contributing heavily to the funds of libertarian organizations in the mistaken belief that thus they are helping restore the virtuous freedom of the early Republic. American industry and commerce on a large scale could not survive for a single year, without the protections extended by government at its several levels.

Rousseau's Disciples. "To begin with unlimited freedom," Dostoevsky wrote, "is to end with unlimited despotism." The worst enemies of enduring freedom for all may be certain folk who demand incessantly more liberty for themselves. This is true of a country's economy, as of other matters. America's economic success is based upon an old foundation of moral habits, social customs and convictions, much historical experience, and commonsensical political understanding. Our structure of free enterprise owes much to the conservative understanding of property and production expounded by Alexander Hamilton — the adversary of the libertarians of his day. But our structure of free enterprise owes nothing at all to the destructive concept of liberty that devastated Europe during the era of the French Revolution — that is, to the ruinous impossible freedom preached by Jean Jacques Rousseau. Our 20th century libertarians are disciples of Rousseau's notion of human nature and Rousseau's political doctrines.

Have I sufficiently distinguished between libertarians and conservatives? Here I have been trying to draw a line of demarcation, not to refute libertarian arguments; I shall turn to the latter task in a few minutes.

Before I essay that task, however, let me illustrate my discourse by a parable.

True Genius is Centric. The typical libertine of 1988 delights in eccentricity — in private life as in politics. His is the sort of freedom, or license, that brings on social collapse. Libertarianism and libertinism are near allied. As that staunch Victorian conservative James Fitzjames Stephen instructs us, "Eccentricity is far more often a mark of weakness than a mark of strength." G.K. Chesterton remarks that true genius is not eccentric, but centric.

With respect to libertarian eccentricity, the dream of an absolute private freedom is one of those visions that issue from between the gates of ivory; and the disorder that they would thrust upon society already is displayed in the moral disorder of their private affairs. Some present here will recall the article on libertarianism in *National Review*, a few years ago, by that mordant psychologist and sociologist Dr. Ernest van den Haag, who remarked that an unusually high proportion of professed libertarians are homosexuals. In politics as in private life, they demand what nature cannot afford.

Total Annihilation. The enemy to all custom and convention ends in the outer darkness, where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth. The final emancipation from religion, the state, moral and positive law, and social responsibilities is total annihilation: the freedom from deadly destruction. When obsession with an abstract Liberty has overcome personal and public order — why, then, in Eliot's lines, we are —

...whirled
Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear
In fractured atoms.

Just that is the theme of my parable — or rather, of Chesterton's parable, for I offer you now a hasty synopsis of G.K. Chesterton's story "The Yellow Bird" — which too few people have read, though it was published in 1929. Chesterton knew that we must accept the universe that was created for us.

Russian Zealot. In Chesterton's tale, there comes to a venerable English country house a guest, Professor Ivanhov, a Russian scholar who has published a much praised book, *The Psychology of Liberty*. He is a zealot for emancipating, expanding, the elimination of all limits — in short, a thoroughgoing libertarian.

Ivanhov, under the shelter of an old English roof and enjoying not merely all English liberties but also the privileges of a guest, proceeds to put into practice his libertarian doctrines. He commences his operations by liberating the yellow bird, a canary, from its cage; once out the window, the canary promptly is torn limb from limb by a predatory bird of the forest. The next day Ivanhov proceeds to liberate his host's goldfish by smashing their bowl. On the third day, resolved not to endure imprisonment in the arching "round prison" of the sky that shuts in the earth, Ivanhov ends by blowing up the beautiful old house where he has lodged — together with himself.

"What exactly is liberty?" inquires a spectator of these libertarian events — Gabriel Gale, Chesterton's mouthpiece. "First and foremost, surely, it is the power of a thing to be itself. In some ways the yellow bird was free in the cage. It was free to be alone. It was free to sing. In the forest its feathers would be torn to pieces and its voice choked for ever. Then I

began to think that being oneself, which is liberty, is itself limitation. We are limited by our brains and bodies; and if we break out we cease to be ourselves, and, perhaps, to be anything."

The Russian psychologist could not abide the necessary conditions of human existence; he must eliminate all limits; he could not endure the "round prison" of the overarching sky. But his alternative was annihilation for himself and his lodging; and he embraced that alternative. He ceased to be anything but fractured atoms. That is the ultimate freedom of the devoted libertarian. If, *per impossibile*, American society should accept the leadership of libertarian ideologies — why, this Republic might end in fractured atoms, with a Russian touch to the finale.

"Unwelcome Cross." Notwithstanding, there is something to be said for the disintegrated Professor Ivanhov — relatively speaking. With reference to some remarks of mine in an earlier Heritage lecture, there wrote to me Mr. Marion Montgomery, the Georgia critic and novelist: "The libertarians give me the willies. I much prefer the Russian anarchists, who at least have a deeply disturbed moral sensibility (that Dostoevsky makes good use of), to the libertarian anarchist. There is a decadent fervor amongst some of the latter which makes them an unwelcome cross for conservatism to bear."

Just so. The representative libertarian of this decade is humorless, intolerant, self-righteous, badly schooled, and dull. At least the old-fangled Russian anarchist was bold, lively, and knew which sex he belonged to.

It is not well-intentioned elderly gentlemen who call themselves libertarians that I reproach here; not, as I mentioned earlier, those persons who, through misapprehension, lend their names and open their checking accounts to "libertarian" publications and causes and extravagances. Rather, I am exposing the pretensions of the narrow doctrinaires or strutting libertines who have imprisoned themselves within a "libertarian" ideology as confining and as unreal as Marxism — if less persuasive than that fell delusion.

Metaphysically Mad. Why are these doctrinaire libertarians, with a few exceptions, such peculiar people — the sort who give healthy folk like Marion Montgomery the willies? Why do genuine conservatives feel an aversion to close association with them? Why is an alliance between conservatives and libertarians inconceivable, except for very temporary purposes? Why, indeed, would any such articles of confederation undo whatever gains conservatives have made in recent years?

I give you a blunt answer to those questions. The libertarians are rejected because they are metaphysically mad. Lunacy repels, and political lunacy especially. I do not mean that they are dangerous: nay, they are repellent merely. They do not endanger our country and our civilization, because they are few, and seem likely to become fewer. (Here I refer, of course, to our home-grown American libertarians, and not to those political sects, among them the Red Brigades of Italy, that have carried libertarian notions to bolder lengths.) There exists no peril that American public policies will be affected in any substantial degree by libertarian arguments; or that a candidate of the tiny Libertarian Party ever will be elected to any public office of significance: the good old causes of Bimetallism, Single Tax, or Prohibition enjoy a more hopeful prospect of success in the closing years of this century

than do the programs of libertarianism. But one does not choose as a partner even a harmless political lunatic.

What do I mean when I say that today's American libertarians are metaphysically mad, and so, repellent? Why, the dogmata of libertarianism have been refuted so often, both dialectically and by the hard knocks of experience, that it would be dull work to rehearse here the whole tale of folly. I offer you merely a few of the more conspicuous insufficiencies of libertarianism as a credible moral and political mode of belief. Such differences from the conservatives' understanding of the human condition make inconceivable any coalition of conservatives and libertarians.

First, the great line of division in modern politics, as Eric Voegelin reminds us, is not between totalitarians on the one hand and liberals (or libertarians) on the other: instead, it lies between all those who believe in a transcendent moral order, on the one side, and on the other side all those who mistake our ephemeral existence as individuals for the be-all and end-all. In this discrimination between the sheep and the goats, the libertarians must be classified with the goats — that is, as utilitarians admitting no transcendent sanctions for conduct. In effect, they are converts to Marx's dialectical materialism; so conservatives draw back from them on the first principle of all.

Second, in any tolerable society, order is the first need. Liberty and justice may be established only after order is reasonably secure. But the libertarians give primacy to an abstract Liberty. Conservatives, knowing that "liberty inheres in some sensible object," are aware that freedom may be found only within the framework of a social order, such as the Constitutional order of these United States. In exalting an absolute and undefinable "liberty" at the expense of order, the libertarians imperil the very freedom that they praise.

Third, conservatives disagree with libertarians on the question of what holds civil society together. The libertarians contend — so far as they endure any binding at all — that the nexus of society is self-interest, closely joined to cash payment. But the conservatives declare that society is a community of souls, joining the dead, the living, and those yet unborn; and that it coheres through what Aristotle called friendship and Christians call love of neighbor.

Fourth, libertarians (like anarchists and Marxists) generally believe that human nature is good and beneficent, though damaged by certain social institutions. Conservatives, to the contrary, hold that "in Adam's fall we sinned all"; human nature, though compounded of both good and evil, cannot be perfected. Thus the perfection of society is impossible, all human beings being imperfect — and among their vices being violence, fraud, and the thirst for power. The libertarian pursues his illusory way toward a Utopia of individualism — which, the conservative knows, is the path to Avernus.

Fifth, the libertarian asserts that the state is the great oppressor. But the conservative finds that the state is natural and necessary for the fulfillment of human nature and the growth of civilization; it cannot be abolished unless humanity is abolished; it is ordained for our very existence. In Burke's phrases, "He who gave us our nature to be perfected by our virtue, willed also the necessary means of its perfection. — He willed therefore the state — He willed its connection with the source and original archetype of all perfection." Without

