

A History of Libertarianism

by George C. Leef

Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement by Brian Doherty (Public Affairs, 2007); 741 pages; \$35.

With *Radicals for Capitalism*, veteran libertarian journalist Brian Doherty (whose work is most often found in *Reason*) gives the world what he calls a “freewheeling history of the modern American libertarian movement.” That is the book’s subtitle and it fully lives up to it. Doherty paints a picture of the libertarian movement and, often in great detail, the people who have driven it forward. In doing so, he fills a great need. Although there are many books by libertarians about their vision for a society in which coercion has become a barbarous relic of the past, until now there has been no book providing a survey of the entire movement. *Radicals for Capitalism* is not just a “who did and said what” kind of history, but an inspiring tribute to the extraordinary men and women who refused to abandon the ideals of liberty. With verve, wit, and devotion, this book tells their story.

Doherty’s coverage is amazingly thorough; to say “encyclopedic” would be putting it mildly. All the important people and organizations that have been active in the libertarian movement are discussed at length. Accumulating this mountain of information must have been a true labor of love spanning many years. If you want to know anything — or everything — about the libertarian movement, this is the book to have.

In Doherty’s account, five people are treated as the key actors: Ludwig von Mises, F.A. Hayek, Ayn Rand, Milton Friedman, and Murray Rothbard. Even though they often disagreed with each other and wouldn’t necessarily have been happy with the “libertarian” label, they can be regarded as the leading thinkers of the movement. After reading about those five (and dozens of other prominent libertarians), the reader is apt to think that this movement is about as cohesive as a herd of cats. What ties them together?

The answer is that they all believed that it’s better for people to be free than to be constrained. Libertarians, Doherty explains, may be in favor of freedom on philosophical grounds — that it is morally right that people should be able to make their own decisions and not be subject to the control of others; or on economic grounds — that people will prosper to the extent that they are free; or both. The author himself doesn’t take sides in the long-standing argument between the natural-rights and utilitarian camps. He just wants readers to be drawn into his subject. I think he succeeds, although I haven’t queried any nonlibertarians who have read the book to know for sure.

Resistance to tyranny

The book traces the development of the libertarian philosophy. It didn't spring full-blown from anyone's brain, but emerged slowly from the moral and economic reasoning of many intellectuals. Doherty examines the development in his chapter entitled "Patriots, Unterrified Jeffersonians, and Superfluous Men." Here, he has kind words for that unjustly neglected group, the anti-Federalists, who thought that the Constitution gave too much power to the central government. They understood, Doherty writes, "that state power is always trying to overwhelm political liberty and that defending it requires the unwavering diligence of free citizens." But while the philosophy of liberty grew to full stature in early America, its component ideas go back as far as the ancient Chinese and Greeks. It seems to be the case that most literate societies have produced some thinkers who have grasped that human beings have both an innate desire for freedom and an innate revulsion against coercion. That is the raw material of libertarianism.

If that is the case, however, what accounts for the fact that governments throughout history, even the most venal and despicable ones, have had their defenders? Why have people fought and died for tyrants such as Napoleon and Hitler? Why have so many people in democracies supported authoritarian politicians such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, and George W. Bush? Doherty explains that the state lures many gullible people in with promises of ill-gotten wealth. He quotes one of my libertarian heroes, Frédéric Bastiat: "The state is the great fiction by which everybody tries to live at the expense of everyone else." It isn't possible for that to work, but very few people ever reflect on either the immorality or impracticality of expecting your daily bread (or your house, or school for your children, or your medical care) to come from the government.

Furthermore, governments work incessantly at propagandizing the citizenry to convince them that the state is grand, beneficent, and actually *theirs*. Throughout the book, Doherty presents so many libertarian arguments demolishing the feeble intellectual defenses that prop up worship of government that an open-minded "liberal," "conservative" or "moderate" who reads it is apt to feel his belief system eroding.

Debates and disputes

The bulk of the work consists of Doherty's extremely well-informed discussion of the different branches of the libertarian movement — the Austrian economists, the Randians, the anarcho-capitalists, the Chicago School, and lots of people who aren't easily characterized. We read about the backgrounds, quirks, and key contributions of the leading libertarians. We get the details of the various

libertarian think tanks, philanthropies, and magazines. Naturally, the Libertarian Party is covered, too.

One point that stands out is the fact that libertarians argue among themselves just about as much as they argue with everyone else. Not only does that greatly enliven the book, but I think it also should help persuade nonlibertarians that there is something engaging about a political movement that doesn't simply take some tract as gospel, but gives sharp minds room to argue. Rothbard and Friedman were often at odds, but Doherty makes it clear that it is a strength rather than a weakness that two superior minds could square off in intellectual combat. Hmmmmm do we find such battles among advocates of the welfare state? I think not.

Radicals is a “warts and all” book that never shrinks from talking about the foibles of its subjects. One thing is for sure — the libertarian movement has attracted its share of people who are, well, unusual. Ayn Rand insisted on treatment from her devotees that would have put some kings and queens to shame. Andrew Galambos contended that his ideas were his own property and demanded that those who attended his seminars not discuss them with anyone else. No matter. Every political movement has had some strange people.

For me, the highlight of the book is its final chapter, “An Eternal Revolution.” The world that all the anti-libertarian politicians and intellectuals have handed us is bad and apparently getting worse. “By plumbline libertarian standards,” Doherty writes, “the world is not getting freer. What the government takes, what it presumes it can regulate, has been getting larger, not smaller. The powers in foreign policy and secret investigations and arrests that the executive branch has chosen to arrogate to itself are getting wider, not narrower. We are, on the whole, taxed more, regulated more, asked for our papers more than ever.” All of that being true, shouldn't we admit that the libertarian movement has been a failure? Shouldn't we just retreat to enjoy what freedom the state still allows?

Optimism and hope

Doherty doesn't draw that conclusion. He's an optimist and fills that concluding chapter with evidence that libertarian thinking is more alive than ever and doing more than just keeping a finger in the dike to delay the complete erosion of liberty. He quotes Rose Wilder Lane, who wrote during the really dark days when government planning was the rage, that she hoped that “at the end of this century there will be a higher percentage of people believing in liberty than ever before.” To her wish, Doherty adds, “By that standard, everything has succeeded wonderfully.”

I think that's true and our gratitude needs to go to the many people Doherty has profiled here — the people who fought back against the authoritarians who

wanted to turn everyone into an obedient servant of the state. Today, when the statist unveil new plans for government control over our actions, they run into immediate and ferocious opposition from scholars and bloggers using what are at their core libertarian arguments to show why more government can only make things worse.

Here's a hopeful indicator: Cecile Philippe, who heads up the Institut économique Molinari in Belgium recently wrote that in Europe there are now 150 free-market think tanks, 100 of them founded just in the last four years. The message that freedom works is spreading. Would any of those think tanks exist if it hadn't been for the libertarians of the mid 20th century who resisted the seductive songs of those who wanted an omnipotent state? I don't think so.

Ours will be, as Doherty puts it, a perpetual revolution because the deepest flaw in human character — that of believing it is all right to use coercion against others to get what you want — isn't going to go away. Libertarians will be on hand to fight all the defensive battles that will have to be fought. They will also spearhead the fight to roll back the state's many transgressions against freedom.

For all their efforts at mis-educating and manipulating people, the statist can't change reality and the fact is that coercion doesn't work. Freedom does. That is what gives libertarians the edge. Thanks to Brian Doherty for a book about our libertarian past that will inspire libertarians in the future to keep fighting for what is right.

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