



Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement

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On Wall Street, in the culture of high tech, in American government: Libertarianism—the simple but radical idea that the only purpose of government is to protect its citizens and their property against direct violence and threat—has become an extremely influential strain of thought. But while many books talk about libertarian ideas, none until now has explored the history of this uniquely American movement—where and who it came from, how it evolved, and what impact it has had on our country. In this revelatory book, based on original research and interviews with more than 100 key sources, Brian Doherty traces the evolution of the movement through the unconventional life stories of its most influential leaders—Ludwig von Mises, F.A. Hayek, Ayn Rand, Murray Rothbard, and Milton Friedman—and through the personal battles, character flaws, love affairs, and historical events that altered its course. And by doing so, he provides a fascinating new perspective on American history—from the New Deal through the culture wars of the 1960s to today's most divisive political issues. Neither an exposé nor a political polemic, this entertaining historical narrative will enlighten anyone interested in American politics.

Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement Details

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From Reader Review Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement for online ebook

G. Branden says

Saw this at Borders last year and got sucked in. I must have read 30 pages (from various chapters) before deciding I'd wait for the paperback but that it was otherwise a must-read. My political roots lie in "right-libertarianism" (i.e., get the government, and only the government, off our backs and everything else will work itself out), though that's not exactly where I am now. I am already familiar with many of the big names in the U.S. libertarian movement, though sometimes it's *only* the name I'm really familiar with, and no more. Time to correct that ignorance.

I will be reading this as a companion/counterpart to *White Protestant Nation*, which chronicles the conservative movement over roughly the same period (~1920s to the present). That book is more sober in tone but no less interesting. Conservatives and right-libertarians are the groups I always lock horns with in political arguments, so I reckon it pays to know them better.

I might have also placed this on my "know-your-enemy" shelf but I decided against it. If I made the walk from right- to left-libertarianism, I reckon others can be swayed to do the same.

Brian Schnack says

Freewheeling is apt, as it's nearly a picaresque philosopho/econo/historical romp at equal parts history, comedy, and tragedy - but ultimately a tribute to the men and women who through darkest nights fought to see the day where all but the most dim (bipartisan) statist would sink their teeth into the fruits of 'giving people the right to make, trade, and BEHAVE as they wish.'

Fred R says

It is tempting to suggest that libertarianism is a philosophy only possible in a world where everyone has the personality and cultural values of a libertarian, but on second thought, a society of adolescent ectomorphic ideologues does not sound very attractive. That said, the world is a better place for having libertarians around.

This history is not really what I wanted. It was too close-up in focus, too interested in personality and anecdote. As libertarians tend to have unattractive (Ayn Rand) or superficial (Milton Friedman) personalities, this doesn't make for great reading. I would prefer a more serious discussion of libertarianism's cultural (as opposed to ideological) roots in Manchester liberalism and the American frontier, etc. The modern libertarian movement was born after the New Deal, and a discussion of how the New Deal and the Depression set the conditions for, and gave birth to, this new libertarianism would also be appreciated. Possibly this other book I've described exists, so maybe I should just go read that.

Ken says

A very even handed look at the history of Libertarian political thought in the USA

Stephen says

Libertarianism has been in the news recently: Julian Assange referred to its rising wave in the Republican party as America's best hope for halting the advance of the police state, and Chris Christie (governor of New Jersey and rumored as a presidential contender in 2016) scoffed at it, causing a bit of a row between him and libertarian-leaning Senator Rand Paul. American libertarianism is distinct in holding as sacred something the first libertarians regard as suspect: property. While historically, libertarianism was born out of the left's distrust for the state, authority, and coercive power -- power created by property and the acquisition of wealth -- American libertarianism is more a renaming of classical liberalism, of the idea that the government should stay out of the economy and out of people's lives. But this survey of American right-libertarianism is not limited to Adam Smith. It is a work of economics, yes, but realm of thought covered here delves into questions as old as philosophy: what is a person's proper relationship with other people? This expansive volume, which seeks to do for right-wing libertarianism what Russell Kirk did for conservatism in *The Conservative Mind*, ranges from the mild, traditional F.A. Hayek to ranting ideologues who dream of being Nietzschean supermen. Although most helpful in summarizing the contributions and sharing the lives of a wide range of individuals, many of whom history has forgotten entirely, its size may scare many off: at 740 pages, it's no brief read. The author, as a contributor to *Reason* magazine ("Free Minds and Free Markets") is wholly sympathetic to his cause, of course, but his being a true believer doesn't diminish the volume's value: there is a far wider variety of thought in right-libertarianism than one might expect and Doherty is helpful in analyzing the thoughts of conflicting individuals, discerning their shared beliefs and examining why they later came to oppose one another. Sometimes the narrative wanders into the realm of the obscure, especially when discussing economic esoterica, but *Radicals* largely lives up to the promise of being "freewheeling". This is not a question of editing: *Radicals* isn't rough around the edges, only written with a deliberate breeziness that seems out of place with the topics being discussed. Referring to "bullshit arguments" and employing 'natch' for 'naturally' does not inspire confidence in the author's seriousness.

Radicals for Capitalism briefs readers on the lives of scores of persons, some more significant than others. While Hayek, Ludwig van Mises, and Murray Rothbard are names which get a lot of traffic, 'furries of liberty' like Isabel Paterson and Rose Wilder Lane are probably unheard of outside the realm of libertarian historians. The great variety of forceful and opinionated personalities here are generally divided into two groups: economists and philosophers, with some mutual crossover. Whatever their focus, all emphasized the importance of property and the rights of the Individual as supreme. The basic ideas are not new, and Doherty accordingly begins with Enlightenment which birthed classical liberalism. *Radicals* is a history of how these ideas were fleshed out and expressed in the contexts of their time, as well as passed on to other generations. The right-wing libertarian movement, judging by this account, seems to have crystallized around opposition to the New Deal. Most of the book's action takes place in the middling decades of the 20th century, in which the American public became increasingly comfortable with the rising role of the state in their lives (through Social Security, conscription, federal involvement in mortgages, transportation, and food, etc).

Although the libertarians here often worked together in opposition against the rise of the state, they were

hardly monolithic. Some, like Hayek, wrote books debating economic policies, and engaged in weekend conferences and discussion groups (Mont Pelerin Society, Circle Bastiat) to study the problems they faced together, and articulate why they thought government policies ill-considered, others like the Foundation for Economic Education sought to educate the populace more directly, by mailing out pamphlets defending the free market. Some wrote novels with libertarian themes (Rand, Robert Heinlein), and still others -- entertainingly -- infiltrated the radical student left and tried to convert their energy into furthering the libertarian cause. This book was worth reading just for the idea of staid economists s getting high and then waxing poetic about the beauty of liberty -- then ditching their suits for fatigue jackets and wandering into riots to fight the Man. (And then there are the many attempts of libertarians to buy islands and build their own nations, which read like a series of wacky Wile E. Coyote misadventures.) While men like Hayek and Mises advocated a marginal role (at best) for the government in economic matters for various reasons (government influence caused corruption, economies are too complex to plan efficiently or fairly, etc), others like Ayn Rand and Rothbard were libertarians for ideological reasons, to the point that Rand berated Mises for being a socialist because he didn't condemn government economic involvement for the 'right' reasons. The infighting sapped their energy, but theirs is still a cause on the march: Reagan and Bush may have only given lip-service to it by the advocates' standards, but lovers of the "freedom philosophy" were admitted in the court of presidential politics in the form of Milton Friedman and others Although the Libertarian Party (the history of which is chronicled here) is not presently strong contender for national elections, the 20th century produced influential libertarian think-tanks like the Cato Institute, and the growth of the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street both demonstrate a rising popular contempt for the government's constant intrusions into their lives and business policies.

Radicals for Capitalism is a book to be considered, if carefully. Doherty doesn't write to convince: the arguments for libertarian here are not aimed at the reader, but are presented for cross-comparison and examination. Presumably, those willing to read seven hundred pages on a single subject are sympathetic to it to begin with. Those who are interested in learning about the philosophy will find the history worth their while, and be entertained by the unexpected antics of these personalities along the way. This mostly makes up for the grating effect of some of the thinkers featured, like the dazzlingly self-righteous Ayn Rand, who appears early and never seems go away. (Doherty doesn't seem particularly sympathetic to her, despite the fixation.) Rothbard is another mildly obnoxious star, asserting late in the book that children have no right to expect care from their parents, who are perfectly within their rights to let the little parasitic bastards starve. I was personally impressed by the variety of thought and people featured within the book, and though it grew wearisome, the thoughtful contributions overcame the manic ones, and the book makes it easier to appreciate right-libertarianism as something more than a sinister tool of big business to free itself of restrictions. The men and women chronicled here came by their ideas honestly, they believed them sincerely, and they argued for them passionately. I would still avoid some of them at a dinner party in real life, but an age of bank bailouts and PRISM, even maniacs for liberty can sound sensible. The book would benefit from being a little less freewheeling, and it focuses more on free markets than on civil liberties.

If you want an idea of how across-the-spectrum the book is, RationalWiki's article on Murray Rothbard is a kind of case study, and is much shorter at one page.

http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Murray_R...

Jim says

Fascinating look at the mercurial personalities that formed the modern libertarian movement. The most

interesting part for me was the discussion of the wilderness years of the 1950s, when collectivism and scientific statism were presumed to be the future, while classical liberalism and individual freedom were thought to be quaint 19th century notions. Libertarianism was truly radical then; today, the radicals in the movement have to try and outrage the South Park crowd to be noticed- not an easy task.

Doherty does a good job mixing in explanations of the philosophies and economic reasoning underpinning the actions of various movement giants (Rand and Rothbard, in particular, were more philosophical than strictly economics-based). i personally would have liked to hear more about the Chicago School (usually mentioned in counterpoint to the Austrian School, which got much more ink), but then I have a whole other book on that to read.

Mostly this book was about the brilliant and highly-influential thinkers who brought individualism back into mainstream political thought. They're also just a wacky crowd, which makes for an interesting read. It's very inside-baseball stuff, so you have to like this sort of political philosophy discussion (and probably be at least somewhat sympathetic to libertarianism or it will drive you insane), but for a long book (600+ pages), it was a short read.

Sam says

If you're at all interested in "the history of the modern American libertarian movement," this is the book to read.

Alex Bales says

Informative, but disorganized writing style.

Tom Nixon says

This book was something of a disappointment to me, but I think you had to kind of expect that. The Libertarian Movement- if there is such a thing that can encompass one, overarching label is so big, so wide, so varied that it would be next to impossible to do half of it justice, much less complete with author Brian Doherty labels a 'Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement.'

Politically, this didn't do much for me. I think I'll flirt with Libertarians on certain issues, but I don't think I'll be persuaded to jump fully onboard. They're sort of like benign communists, some wanting to do away with the state entirely in the anarcho-capitalist vein while others want to minimize it as much as possible. And therein lies my biggest problem with this book: lack of concrete policies that have a hope in hell of being enacted in the real world. Libertarianism seems to long on theory and very short on practice.

But give Doherty credit: he builds a lengthy, complete history of all the major players in the modern Libertarian movement from Ayn Rand to Murray Rothbard to Milton Friedman, Hayek, Mises- there is no stone left unturned and Doherty takes pains to explain to the reader just how exactly each individual impacted the development of the modern movement. Unfortunately in the case of Hayek and Mises, this requires slogging through a seriously long Chapter on the Austrian School of Economics before you get back

into more interesting things- but every person is important, even the economists.

If Doherty falls down occasionally in my book, it might be due to the fact that he's right smack dab in the thick of the movement he's trying to chronicle. There's a faint sheen of hagiography that sometimes pops out at you and occasional bouts of excited hero worship leap off the page all of which left me wondering just how on the level some of his descriptions and accounts were and if this really was a true, objective look at the Libertarian movement. That said, I can't imagine there'd be too many other scholars out there willing to take this on, so at the end of the day, more power to him. He did a damn fine job, if I do say so myself.

Some interesting tidbits I came away with: Ayn Rand is... well, I don't know if she's crazy, but damn is objectivism is weird as all git out. I tended to view Rand as a somewhat strange author- the worlds she created in Atlas Shrugged and The Fountainhead struck me as cold, hard, selfish world's with no room for any trace of compassion- which turns out is exactly what she was getting at. The Libertarian movement at the time took the tack that if you just educated enough people to the benefits of free market, they'd get it and it'd all be hunky dory. Rand disagreed with that pointing out that as long as human beings were altruistic that could never happen, so people had to learn the virtues of being selfish.

Is that not completely crazy?

There's more- for instance, I didn't know Howard Stern ran on the Libertarian Ticket for Governor of New York back in the early 90s. I didn't know about people who retreated back to the land to escape the oppressive state- including living literally in the forest. Or people that were crazy about gold. Or people that think psychology is a crime because it deprives insane people of their basic right to liberty.

Or this, that or the other thing... no doubt, this was an incredibly informative book, packed to the gills with knowledge that I genuinely didn't know- so learning new things is always a delight, so I liked that aspect of it, but I still have my doubts about Libertarianism- this book didn't make me a convert. In a capitalist world where mass production devalues quality in the favor of quantity, consumers have less power to move the market. Wal-Mart won't care if people buy crap at Target. They make enough of it to absorb any loss... so I have serious questions. And the upshot of it is that I think I'll have to sit down and try and tackle Friedrich Hayek.

Economics. You bastards.

Overall: Good, informative, thought-provoking, this book ultimately didn't make a believer out of me. Maybe that wasn't its intention, but I remain unconvinced.

Patrick Peterson says

I generally liked the book and learned a fair amount of new things about this freedom movement that I have been passionate about for over 30 years.

I was very impressed with how Doherty understands so many key points of Austrian/free market economics and the differences with the far more semi-free market Chicagoans. Even differences between Mises and Hayek were explained quite well.

I've read some reviews pointing out failings/errors, but they still seem to pale compared to how much he got

right.

The detail is amazing, and a bit off-putting, especially when he deals with the foibles of certain leaders of the movement. One of my heroes, Leonard Read, for instance, seemed to have a strange philosophical/religious penchant. I had known precious little about it before reading the book, except his semi-mystical references in various of his books, and kinda shrugged it off as not important. I still think it is less important than what great positive achievement he did make: founding and running FEE for so many years.

James says

Brian Doherty's *Radicals for Capitalism* is a riveting and brilliant narrative of the evolution of American libertarianism. He both captures the lives and the ideas of a movement with its roots in the enlightenment and its greatest heroes in twentieth-century America. I was impressed with the detail, breadth, and compelling style of this history of the ideas and people of the libertarian 'movement'. Along the way he uncovers many details that should be interesting for all but the most knowledgeable among libertarian cognoscenti. You may find more information about certain individuals, especially those who are better known, in their respective biographies but the best overview is to be found in Brian Doherty's magnum opus.

Scarlett Sims says

I think the easiest way to do this would be in a pro/con format.

Pros:

- Incredibly informative. It's a pretty long book and I learned a LOT of things I didn't know about, mostly about the many different factions and beliefs that fall under the general umbrella of "Libertarian."
- Neutral point of view. The author is a libertarian, but the book wasn't written so much out of a desire to convert, more of a desire to educate. He talks about many conflicting views and opinions in a disinterested tone, not in the Ayn-Rand-anvilicious sort of way.

Cons:

- Outdated. It was published in 2006. We've had an election since that time and a lot has happened. Ron Paul did get a few mentions but I think he would get much more attention if this book had been written after 2008.
- Dry tone. It's a history book, so it's not going to be really really funny or anything, however I wish more of the author's personality had come through.

Bottom Line:

Whatever your political leaning, if you want to know more about the LP or small government politics in general, this book would be a good place to start. There are extensive footnotes and a shorter bibliography for further study. It wasn't the most fun read, but I certainly learned from it.

James says

I wish this book was published when I was in college, and I wish I read it then. This would have saved me much searching and understanding. This is such a great and condensed (even though it's thick) book on the libertarian movement. He treats all sides fairly. Sadly, I read this book to help me put an end to my ideological struggle, and I think it has accomplished that. I no longer feel a deep need to read the important movement literature. I'm afraid to be apart of the movement.

Dan Clore says

This voluminous tome covers in great detail America's right-wing, free-market and private-property oriented libertarian movement in all of its phases, including Classical Liberalism, the Austrian and Chicago Schools of economics, libertarian-leaning conservatism, Objectivism, the Libertarian Party, anarcho-capitalism, agorism, and so forth. With a few caveats, the book can be highly recommended to all interested as probably the definitive treatment of its subject.

The book is written using an old-fashioned scholarly style that places documentation in endnotes. That is, of course, perfectly acceptable in itself; but Doherty also includes a good deal of text in his endnotes, so that the reader must continually go back and forth between the main text and the notes.

Another caveat concerns the subject as expressed in the volume's title. While the book covers one modern American libertarian movement, this isn't the only modern American libertarian movement, as the title implies. The other modern American libertarian movement is the traditional anarchist movement, the libertarian wing of the socialist movement. Consulting the two-dimensional chart used by The Political Compass should help readers understand my point. Most of the traditional anarchist movement falls in the Libertarian Left quadrant of the Political Compass's chart; most of the libertarian movement covered by Doherty falls in the Libertarian Right quadrant and much of it in the Authoritarian Right quadrant.

This is significant, as the traditional anarchist movement had used the term "libertarian" for itself for about a hundred years before anyone even suggested using the term for the movement that Doherty covers. Doherty hardly mentions the traditional anarchist movement, usually only when it has some direct connection to the Libertarian Right. The anarcho-syndicalist union IWW (Industrial Workers of the World), probably the largest American traditional libertarian group, is barely mentioned. Noam Chomsky, the most prominent libertarian socialist of the last forty years, is only mentioned twice, both times when the Libertarian Right was reaching out to the Left. Of all the traditional anarchist movement, only the individualist/mutualist wing of Josiah Warren, Benjamin Tucker, and Lysander Spooner (which falls toward the center of The Political Compass's Left/Right axis, while the much larger collectivist/communist/syndicalist wing falls on the Left and the anarcho-capitalists on the Right) is treated in any detail.

Caveats about the use of the terms "socialism" and "capitalism" should be adequately addressed by consulting my Nolan Chart column "Socialism and Capitalism".

Subjects treated at length in the book include individuals such as Albert Jay Nock, Frank Chodorov, Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich von Hayek, Isabel Paterson, Laura Ingalls Wilder's daughter Rose Wilder Lane (I haven't read the works of either Lane or Wilder, but it might be worth noting that as portrayed on the classic TV-series Little House on the Prairie, the town of Walnut Grove has no government of its own — if

someone wants a sheriff or judge, they have to send elsewhere for one), Ayn Rand, Nathaniel Branden, Leonard Read, Robert LeFevre, Milton Friedman, David Friedman, Murray Rothbard, Robert Nozick, Thomas Szasz, etc., and institutions such as the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), the Libertarian Party, Cato Foundation, Reason magazine, etc.

Doherty tells a “warts and all” story, and there are many amusing parts, such as the account of Andrew Galambos, whose ideas cannot be recounted because he claims ownership over them. Ayn Rand and her Objectivism always make for entertaining reading, what with the bountiful irony of a purported ideology of freedom that starts on grounds that cannot be taken seriously by anyone with a minimal knowledge of science and philosophy, goes on to create a self-sealing belief system that simply discounts any inconvenient empirical facts while considering anyone who dares to disagree as not just mistaken but eeeevil, and ends with a dogmatic personal authoritarianism that wreaks as much havoc in the lives of its robotized, Randroid followers as any political authoritarianism could hope to.

Given that Doherty does not treat the Libertarian Left, I could find few omissions to complain about in his book. At first I thought I had a couple good ones to carp over — Milton Friedman's involvement with Chilean dictator Pinochet, and Loompanics Unlimited, but while these are not noted in the index, I did find them in the text. I would have liked more information on Kerry Wendell Thornley, who didn't just peter out into insanity, but produced the excellent book *Zenarchy* late in his life, and on Robert Anton Wilson, who deserves much more than four pages.

All in all, with its engaging style and wealth of information, I can recommend this book unreservedly to all interested in the Libertarian Right. It will probably remain the definitive account for a long time to come. Regardless of the reader's own ideology (and those on the Libertarian Left will probably not be too pleased with seeing those on the Authoritarian Right, such as free-market conservatives, continually referred to as libertarian), the book should provide an enjoyable, informative experience.

David says

So far, it's great.
