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LIBERTARIANISM

From the customs of liberal society and the writings of John Locke (1632–1704), David Hume (1711–1776), Adam Smith (1723–1790), and myriad others, there emerged an ideological sensibility dubious of government activism, leery of collectivist urges, and resistant of nationalistic sentiments. It learned to accept commercial society and cosmopolitanism, and even celebrate them. It maintains a presumption of individual liberty. The name of this sensibility has varied in time and place, but in the United States since the 1970s the name has been *libertarianism*.

The signal feature of libertarianism is the distinction between voluntary and coercive action. Coercion is the aggressive invasion (including the threat of invasion) of one's property or freedom of consent (or contract). Libertarians maintain a logic of ownership whereby owners have a claim to the control and use of their property, a claim good against the world. The logic is exhibited throughout centuries of liberal society in the normal, legitimate goings-on of private parties. It emerges as intuitive and natural. Adam Smith wrote in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) that “the obvious and simple system of natural liberty establishes itself of its own accord” (bk. 4, chap. 9). As for the determination of who owns what, there are universal norms, beginning with ownership in one's own person, and extending to property acquired within the family and in voluntary interaction with others (such as trade, production, and gift relations). Libertarians admit the holes and gray areas, but argue that the distinctions nonetheless hold much water, and that rival ideologies are also plagued by holes and gray areas, even more so.

Libertarians reject any “social contract” device as a way to bring political relations into “consent.” They reject the idea that, whether by virtue of democracy or simply by

maintaining residence within the polity, one voluntarily agrees to the government laws one lives under. Government is recognized as a special kind of organization, and might be said to enjoy a special kind of legitimacy, but it does not get a special dispensation on coercion. In the eyes of the libertarian, everything the government does that would be deemed coercive and criminal if done by any other party in society is still coercive. For example, imagine that a neighbor decided to impose a minimum-wage law on you. Since most government action, including taxation, is of that nature, libertarians see government as a unique kind of organization engaged in wholesale coercion, and coercion is the treading on liberty. This semantic, libertarians say, was central in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century custom and social thought, for example in Adam Smith's treatment of “natural liberty” and through the American founders, the abolitionists, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), and William Graham Sumner (1840–1910). (Indeed, libertarians will argue that the vocabulary of modern liberalism is in many respects a systematic undermining of the older vocabulary.)

To just about anyone, *coercion* has a negative connotation. And, indeed, libertarians generally oppose government action. That disposition holds not only against economic intervention, but extends to coercive egalitarianism (the welfare state), restrictions on personal lifestyle (such as drug prohibition), and extensive government ownership of resources. Libertarians also tend to oppose military action abroad, though some libertarians may favor it when they believe that it bids fair to reduce coercion on the whole (that is, across the globe).

Within libertarian thought, there has been much debate over whether the principle of liberty is absolute (that is, 100 percent), or, as Adam Smith held, simply a presumption (say, 90 percent). Most classical liberals regarded it as a presumption, as have the transitional figures Ludwig von Mises (1881–1973) and Friedrich Hayek (1899–1992), both originally from Austria, and the famous American economist Milton Friedman. In judging where coercive government policy should be accepted or even deemed desirable, the “maxim” libertarians appeal to broad sensibilities about consequences, including moral and cultural consequences, of alternative policy arrangements. They do not attempt to set out any complete or definitive characterization of such sensibilities, any algorithm of desirability, and they declare that it is unreasonable to demand that they do so, especially since the same demand is not made of rival ideologies.

In justifying the presumption of liberty, most libertarians, especially economists, emphasize the practical arguments—liberty works better than government intervention—but others have maintained that liberty has an

ethical authority established quite separately from any consideration of practical results.

The emergence of libertarianism, as such, comes about from the retreat of classical liberalism (particularly after 1900) and, particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States, the concurrent change of the popular meaning of *liberalism*, such that those who kept up cosmopolitan, laissez-faire, antistatist views no longer had a name.

Mises, Hayek, and Friedman clung to the old term *liberalism*. The term *libertarian* was used occasionally, but was really seized by the critical figure of modern libertarianism, Murray N. Rothbard (1926–1995). Beginning in the 1960s, Rothbard reasserted the old definition of *liberty* and infused *libertarianism* with a paradigmatic content holding that institutionalized coercion is always wrong and government action always damaging to social utility. Libertarianism implied anarchism. A prodigious polymath and challenging, charismatic personality, Rothbard erected an integrated doctrine for ethics, politics, and economics.

Anarcho hyphenates (such as *anarcho-capitalism*) were discussed also by other libertarian theoreticians, notably favorably by David Friedman and critically by Robert Nozick (1938–2002). Rothbard, David Friedman, and others built on the notion that private ownership and voluntary exchange are intuitive and focal, and hence lend themselves to a kind of spontaneous adoption by decentralized social institutions. They speculated on how there could be a free market in the enforcement of property rights, like private security companies today. Later research on voluntary reputational practices and institutions, exemplified, for example, by credit reporting agencies, would lend support to the view that, in a world where practically all property is privately owned, government police would not be necessary to resolving disputes and maintaining internal order. As for defense from external aggression, Rothbard tended to argue that no foreign government would have plausible cause or the practical means to conquer an anarcho-libertarian society, while David Friedman admitted uncertainties. The anarcho speculations, as well as Rothbard's extreme claims for liberty, arguably diverted libertarians from the task of developing a persuasive, relevant ideology, and hindered the penetration of libertarian thinking into mainstream discourse.

Many of the same people in the United States who were fashioning modern libertarianism were also busy fashioning the so-called Austrian school of economics, named for the influence of the Austrians Mises and Hayek (who in 1974 was awarded a Nobel Prize in economics). Austrian economics is solidly pro-laissez-faire, but there has always been a tension between two types of thought.

One, exemplified by Mises and Rothbard, champions human reason as an engine of discovery of scientific truth and purports to deduce a priori the superiority of voluntary arrangements. The other, inspired by Smith and exemplified by Hayek, criticizes the pretense of knowledge. It views economic processes as a skein of local practices and peculiarities, with their own dialectics of change and correction, and hence largely unknowable to regulators or even the most assiduous intellectuals. Followers of Mises and Rothbard claim a scientific foundation for laissez-faire economics; followers of Smith and Hayek criticize the scientific claims of interventionist economics. All "Austrian" economists are at least broadly libertarian in their policy views, but many libertarians are mainstream in economic method; Milton Friedman and David Friedman, for example, though admiring of Hayek, would be sharply critical of Austrian economics, particularly the Mises-Rothbard version. In fact, Hayek surely had grave misgivings about that as well, and never favored the fashioning of a separate "Austrian" school of economics.

Another important figure in the resurgence of anti-statist ideas was the novelist and pop-philosopher Ayn Rand (1905–1982). Like Rothbard a messianic personality, though with much less learning and scholarship, Rand too set forth a highly integrated belief system, "objectivism." However, Rand strongly favored government's function as the keeper of the peace, and, in sharp contrast to Rothbard, an anticommunist foreign policy. She detested libertarianism, and Rothbard attacked her movement as a cult.

Rothbard's paradigm was so clear and consistent that even the libertarians who soundly rejected his extreme claims for liberty nonetheless found themselves working out their ideas in relation to principles like those he propounded. Nowadays, there remain loyal Rothbardians, but most libertarians think more in the fashion of Smith, Hayek, and Friedman. They insist that government intervention, including taxation, is coercive, but they take the anticoercion principle to be, not a natural axiom, but a natural maxim. They see government as having at least one important and necessary function—the undoing of other governmental functions. (In contrast, Rothbard's vision of libertarian social transformation held that after long years of ideological stirrings, there would come the inevitable internal political crisis, yielding to a widespread awakening and some kind of spontaneous, bottom-up institutional house-cleaning.)

Libertarianism joins the mainstream conversation as a political persuasion anchored in the status quo, not some ideal libertarian society, and yet opposed to the status quo, favoring freer arrangements pretty much across the board. It is perhaps best represented by public-policy institutes, such as the Cato Institute and the Independent

Institute, that develop policy argumentation on an issue-by-issue basis. As for the academic world, the most notable libertarian strongholds are the economics department and law school at George Mason University.

Libertarianism is now a broad tent, rooted in policy issues and insistent on the Locke-Smith-Spencer-Rothbard definition of liberty. Within the tent, only a small portion would defend “anarchism,” but all remain radical in the sense that they insist that government intervention is coercive, and on most issues they entertain and quite likely favor abolishing the government agency or interventions in question.

There has also existed since the 1970s in the United States a Libertarian Party. However, libertarians are usually not much interested in it, chiefly because they feel that within the American system third parties are impossible or even damaging to their own cause.

SEE ALSO *Freedom; Friedman, Milton; Hayek, Friedrich August; Mises, Ludwig Edler von; Philosophy, Political*

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LIBERTY

The etymological origin of *liberty* is the Latin word *libertas*, from *liber*, which means “free.” In the social sciences, *liberty* and *freedom* are often used interchangeably. However, in common parlance, a distinction can be made. *Freedom* is the more general term referring to a lack of restraint in all its manifestations. *Liberty*, in contrast, is typically used when discussing the political and legal aspects of the human condition, particularly those involving choice.

Liberty, as a political ideal, has had a profound influence over the course of human events going back to the eighteenth century. It was a central theme for both the American Revolution (1775–1783) and the French Revolution (1789–1799). Liberty was a fundamental motivation for the rise of the modern democratic state, capitalist economies, and the concern for human rights. In contemporary practice, a number of freedoms are commonly protected by the state, including assembly, association, press, religion, speech, thought, and trade. The importance and significance of liberty is widely acknowledged. Still, there are fundamentally different understandings about what it means and why it is valuable.

Benjamin Constant (1767–1830), for example, distinguishes between what he calls “liberty of the ancients” and “liberty of the moderns.” *Ancient liberty* refers to the direct sharing of political power. It is the “active and constant” participation of citizens in the collective governing of their communities. Consequently, it can only be realized in smaller political units such as the city-state. Ancient liberty involves citizens being able to make truly meaningful contributions to political decisions on a continual basis, thus allowing them to play an intimate role in determining the course of their collective lives. This identification of liberty with ongoing collective political decision-making, however, entails the “complete subjection of the citizen to the authority of the community” (Constant [1820] 1988, p. 311). Still, authentic self-government brought such a “vivid and repeated pleasure” (p. 316) that citizens were willing to make great sacrifices to preserve this form of liberty. The problem is that too little value was attached to the rights of individual citizens.

With the emergence of larger political units like the nation-state, ancient liberty was no longer possible. “Lost in the multitude, the individual can almost never perceive the influence he exercises” (Constant [1820] 1988, p. 316). Liberty, therefore, became associated with individual rights and freedoms. This *modern liberty* consists in “peaceful enjoyment and private independence” (p. 316) for each citizen. It is made possible by legal guarantees such as the rule of law, freedom of expression, property rights, freedom of association, elected political representation, and the right to petition the government. The purpose of modern liberty is to give citizens the opportunity to choose and enjoy their own “private pleasures.” The danger of this type of liberty is that people will get so absorbed in pursuing their personal happiness and interests that they neglect their political responsibilities, thereby allowing the government to overstep its limits.

Another well-known distinction is Isaiah Berlin’s (1909–1997) understandings of negative and positive conceptions of liberty. On the one hand, *negative liberty* simply refers to the absence of external constraints and