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# Libertarians miss holistic nature of society

*Like it or not, we need governments to enforce fundamental social norms*

by Tom Flanagan

## What It Means to Be a Libertarian: A Personal Interpretation

by Charles Murray

(Broadway Books, 1997. 178 pages) \$28

## Libertarianism: A Primer

by David Boaz

(Free Press, 1997. 314 pages) \$31

POLITICS IN MODERN DEMOCRACY IS ORGANIZED AROUND a left-right axis. Other axes may represent ethnic, religious, or regional cleavages, but the left-right spectrum is always present. Parties on the left, whether called liberal as in North America or social democratic as in Europe, advocate a mixture of economic interventionism and social liberation. Parties on the right, usually called conservative, stand for a reverse mixture of free market economics and social restraint.

Some observers, such as Reform leader Preston Manning, think that the left-right spectrum is out of date and should be discarded. Others criticize it for being internally inconsistent. They find it illogical for liberals or socialists to favor government control of people's economic decisions (rent control, utility and transit monopolies) while simultaneously extending personal freedom in other spheres (abortion on demand, legalized pornography). Similarly, they find it illogical for conservatives to insist on economic freedom (privatization, deregulation) while also demanding social conformity (school prayer, public decency).

The consistency critics seem to have a point. If we distinguish between economic and social policy, there are not just two but four possible ideologies: liberalism, conservatism, libertarianism, and authoritarianism. Authoritarians and libertarians are consistent: an

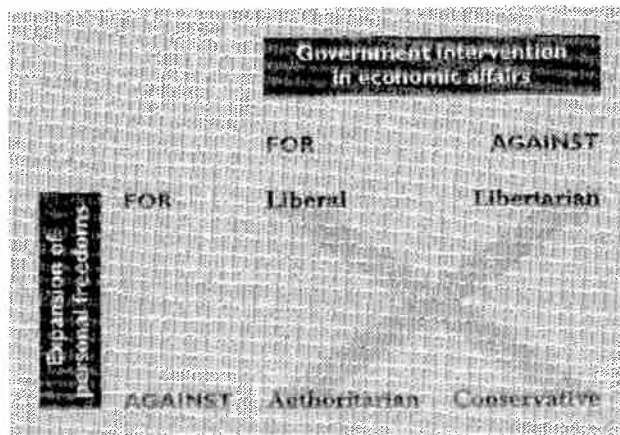
authoritarian would favor more government intervention in social and economic affairs, while a libertarian would oppose government intervention in both.

In the table below, the current political spectrum of muddled alternatives (liberalism versus conservatism) lies along one diagonal, while the different spectrum of internally consistent alternatives (libertarianism versus authoritarianism) lies along the other.

Eloquent new books by American think tankers Charles Murray of the American Enterprise Institute and David Boaz of the Cato Institute expound the libertarian alternative. As both authors freely admit, libertarianism is but a new label for the so-called classical liberalism of philosophers like John Stuart Mill. The starting point for both Murray and Boaz is the "one very simple principle" that Mill asserted in *On Liberty*, "That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant." Or, as Boaz paraphrases Herbert Spencer's law of equal freedom, "Individuals have the right to do whatever they want to, so long as they respect the equal rights of others."

Murray and Boaz apply this principle relentlessly to the issues crowding the American public policy agenda. They would do away with virtually all government programs and

services except for law enforcement and national defence, which would also be substantially trimmed back. They are at their best in showing the welfare state to be inefficient, ineffectual, and even counterproductive. Public education has become steadily more expensive as scores on standardized tests have fallen. Massive increases in public spending on health care haven't affected the trend for improvements in longevity.



## Book reviews

The rising economic opportunities for racial minorities didn't accelerate with the creation of a heavy-handed human-rights apparatus.

As an alternative to government services, libertarians put their faith in nonprofit organizations to channel people's charitable impulses, in profit-seeking ventures in the economy, and in greater mutual care among family and friends – what their hero, economist Friedrich Hayek, called the “spontaneous order” of civil society. We will all take greater personal responsibility for supporting ourselves and our families, raising and educating our children, looking after aging relatives, helping friends in their time of need, contributing to community projects. To Murray, this is “the stuff of life.” To replace passive consumption of impersonal government services with personal production is not a burden but an opportunity.

Indeed, personal responsibility is a key theme in all of this. People will not rise to the challenge of civil society if government removes the challenge. They will not save to educate their children or to support their own retirement if they expect government to offer free public education and pay universal pensions. It is telling that Murray, who favors the legalization of all drugs, would not carry out that policy until the welfare state withers away, making it impossible for people to avoid the consequences of their own choices.

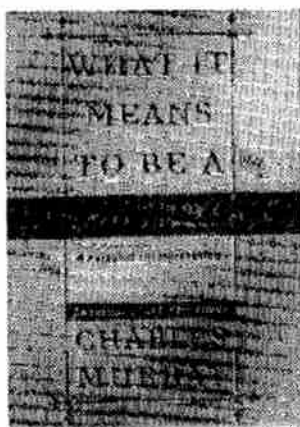
Although I consider myself a conservative, I like to read a libertarian book every year or two; and whenever I do, I find myself teetering on the brink of libertarianism. But I always catch myself before I jump. While I endorse completely the libertarian critique of economic interventionism, I find libertarian social theory, though tempting and persuasive in parts, ultimately unconvincing.

First, the persuasive bits. I agree wholeheartedly with Murray and Boaz, as well as other libertarians such as Milton Friedman and Thomas Szasz, with legalizing drugs; the war on drugs, like the prohibition of alcohol earlier in the century, has been a costly fiasco. And I further agree that conservative preoccupations would disappear if government stopped providing services. Questions about school prayer or the moral content of the curriculum would hardly arise without a public monopoly on education that prevents parents from picking the type of school they want for their children.

But how far can we push freedom of contract? Boaz wants to resolve the debate about homosexual marriage by getting the state out of marriage altogether, except for enforcing whatever contracts of cohabitation people choose to sign with each other. Men and women, gays and straights, would draw up their own agreements and call themselves whatever they

wished. Appealing? Perhaps. But are we ready for polygamy, plus assorted varieties of group cohabitation? And what about support for children and discarded mates?

The libertarian emphasis on self-ownership, property rights, and freedom of contract misses the holistic nature of society, which Edmund Burke called “a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.” Libertarians typically (mis)conceive society as the result of conscious choice – hence the great metaphor of the social contract – rather than as the ongoing network of relationships transcending the generations. Individuals do not create society; more accurately, a certain course of social evolution has created the individual. Though Hayek wrote at length on this issue, contemporary libertarians never cite those parts of his work.



At the heart of the debate is the concept of public goods, and who should pay for them. Libertarians rightly argue that many so-called public goods can be, and have been, supplied perfectly well by the market or by the nonprofit sector of civil society. Lighthouses – the economics textbooks' most beloved example of a public good because the light shines on all ships within the line of sight – were built and maintained by both private entrepreneurs and philanthropic organizations long before government got into the

act, the necessary revenues easily raised by collecting harbor tolls. But the fact that liberals and authoritarians have exaggerated the number and extent of public goods does not mean that no public goods exist – a point that both Murray and Boaz admit, at least in theory.

The moral code and social fabric of a community have the characteristics of public goods. They are valuable because they guide us on how to act in ways both large and small. They are intrinsically public because they involve imitation; thus our actions always “spill over” (to use the jargon of economics) onto others, even if they do not cause the sort of assignable harm that John Stuart Mill

had in mind.

Like libertarians, many conservatives see the social order as largely self-generating and view the need to keep government from undermining it as the single most important priority. Nonetheless, governments are at times necessary to uphold essential social norms. It is not “social engineering” to use tax policy to reinforce the role of the natural family in the social order or to use police power to prevent public displays of degrading sexual practices. Even Mill took the concept of public decency for granted. He would never have tolerated, to take a current Ontario example, topless women on



public streets, though he certainly would have defended private clubs for nudists.

Though libertarianism is a fascinating intellectual construction, it ultimately fails by basing everything on the single value of individual freedom. Perhaps that is why consistent libertarianism has never become the ideology of a successful political party: The small libertarian parties in Canada and the United States are nowhere near coming to power, or even electing legislative representatives.

Boaz foresees the liberal-conservative axis replaced by a libertarian-authoritarian axis in which "the statist conservatives will find themselves aligned with the social democrats as defenders of political society against civil society, a trend that has already begun with the protectionist Buchanan movement and the growing tendency among conservatives not to limit government but to use it to impose conservative values." Time will tell, but I remain skeptical. I see Patrick Buchanan as a temporary, albeit irritating, phenomenon rather than as the harbinger of powerful mass movements to come.

Political conservatism—the alliance between free marketers and social traditionalists—and political liberalism—the

alliance between economic interventionists and social liberationists—are not as logically inconsistent as libertarians and other critics believe. A recent book by the linguist George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know That Liberals Don't*, shows the deep coherence of both conservatism and liberalism. Each has its own vision of the family, which it

generalizes to the society and state. The conservative worldview is based on the "strict father" model, the liberal worldview on the "nurturant parent," and each elaborates a moral code supported by public policies consistent with that code. The free market and traditional morality go together as ways of life, as do economic interventionism and personal liberation through self-fulfilment.

Libertarianism can never be more than an intellectual system, appealing to the few who value logical consistency above everything else. Libertarians who want to have any influence on the real world will

have to throw in their lot with either liberals or conservatives. At the end of the day, most libertarians will see they have much more in common with conservatives than with liberals. □

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Libertarianism  
ultimately fails by basing  
everything on the  
single value of individual  
freedom

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