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Introduction

THIS BOOK is a history of libertarian thought. But what is libertarianism? It depends on whom you ask.

If you were to ask an academic philosopher to list some well-known libertarians, they would probably begin (and possibly end) with Robert Nozick. Nozick published *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* in 1974, and that book has represented libertarianism in undergraduate philosophy courses ever since.

If you were to ask an economist, the answer might be Milton Friedman. Winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1976, Friedman wrote libertarian classics such as *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) and *Free to Choose* (1980).

If you asked a (philosophically precocious) high school student, you might get a different answer: Ayn Rand. Rand's *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) have sold tens of millions of copies and continue to serve as a gateway to libertarianism for many.

A different name you might encounter, especially from political activists outside the academy, is Murray Rothbard. Author of *For a New Liberty* (1973), Rothbard was such a tireless promoter of libertarian ideas that he was known by many as "Mr. Libertarian."

Now imagine that we brought together our philosopher, economist, high school student, and general reader to ask them a related question: *What do libertarians believe?*

Our group would probably start with basics, like: "Libertarians don't like government." And: "They're obsessed with private

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property." And: "Libertarians love capitalism and hate socialism." If we invited group members to elaborate, and share more detailed impressions, they might add: "They seem to care more about logic than about people." And: "They think every social problem can be solved by markets."

Warming to the topic, group members might volunteer: "They support corporations against workers." And: "Libertarians are against social justice." And: "They are racially insensitive and may even be racists." Getting closer to the nub now, group members might continue: "Libertarians claim to combine the best ideas from the left and the right, but when it comes down to it, they most always side with the right." And: "Basically, libertarians are Social Darwinists."

This book tells the story behind those responses: it is an intellectual history of libertarianism. Like every intellectual history, ours is written from a particular moment in time, and is addressed to a particular set of priors in the minds of readers of our era. This was the great challenge in writing this book. For we are in a period—or, perhaps, are only just beginning to emerge from a period—in which the mental model that readers bring to our topic is to an unusual degree already fixed.

Today, a small and relatively homogeneous group of figures, all writing in the same country and against the same historical background, effectively *defines* libertarianism for most readers. To the list of late twentieth-century figures just mentioned—Nozick, Friedman, Rand, Rothbard—we might add a few others such as Ludwig von Mises, F. A. Hayek, and Rose Wilder Lane. But this canon remains compact. The prominence of this particular group of libertarians, writing in same country during the same era, threatens to set the parameters within which any intellectual history of libertarianism must be told.

This book argues that libertarianism has a longer, wider, and more diverse history than is commonly believed. As our opening list of names suggests, most contemporary readers will think of libertarianism as a quintessentially American doctrine that emerged in the twentieth century. In fact, libertarianism was born in the nineteenth century, not the twentieth, and was first developed in Britain and France, only later making its way to the United States.

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From the start, libertarians were known for advocating ideas such as private property, free markets, and individualism. Of course, many earlier classical liberals such as John Locke, Adam Smith, and David Hume had endorsed similar ideas. But what sets libertarians apart is the *absolutism* and *systematicity* with which they affirm the more gentle and compromising ideas of the classical liberals. For libertarians, a market economy is not merely a useful form of social organization: it is a moral imperative based on a unified philosophy of individual freedom. Property rights are not merely *among* the basic rights and liberties of free citizens: they are moral absolutes, and may in fact be the only kind of right that exists. In the same way, an uncompromising emphasis on the individual was often seen as a defining element of libertarianism, so much so that one of the earliest libertarian movements in Britain was known simply as "Individualism," while the first libertarians in the United States were referred to as "individualist anarchists."

As a historical matter, libertarianism's radicalism was born out of a desire to preserve existing freedoms against a perceived existential threat. In nineteenth-century France and Britain, libertarianism developed largely in response to the threat of socialism. Faced with the danger of socialist revolutions in the middle of the century, and more gradualist state socialist movements toward century's end, libertarians radicalized the classical liberal principles of property and free trade into nearly absolute imperatives. Not one inch of ground could be ceded to those calling for greater state involvement in the economy, lest society find itself slipping down the road to socialism and collective serfdom.

By contrast, the birth of libertarian thinking in nineteenth-century America was relatively free of that socialist shadow. In the New World, socialist movements were mostly utopian and anarchistic, rather than revolutionary and statist. Partially as a result, the first generation of American libertarians could not merely coexist with socialist thinkers—many early American libertarians enthusiastically *identified* as socialists. For the first American libertarians, the greatest enemy to liberty was not socialism but *slavery*. Libertarian thinking in America first emerged not so much as a reaction against socialism but from a passionate commitment to abolitionism. Building on their analysis of the injustice of slavery, they focused on the

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property claims of individual workers and insisted that each person had a natural right to the full fruits of their labor: thus condemning not merely slavery but taxation, exploitation, and perhaps even capitalism itself. For many in this first generation of American libertarians, the fight against slavery and the fight for the rights of the laboring classes went hand in hand.

On each continent, then, libertarianism's radicalism emerged and took shape as a reaction against a different set of threats to freedom. In Europe, along with progressive positions such as opposition to colonialism, this defense meant preserving existing liberties against new challenges. In America, it meant tearing down an existing institution to establish freedom anew. But, in both cases, libertarian principles were *dispositionally* ill-suited to serve as mere defenses of the status quo. Taken to their logical conclusion, libertarian principles entail that most existing political and economic institutions are deeply unjust. Libertarianism thus counsels not gradualist reform but a sweeping revolution. The system of welfare—whether social or corporate—is to be abolished. Unjustly acquired property is to be returned to its rightful owner. Restrictions on freedoms of movement and labor must be swept away. Militarism, in which states tax citizens to prepare to fight other states, is intolerable.

In terms of its theoretical foundations, libertarianism is uncompromising in its radicalism. In practice, however, not all libertarians were comfortable embracing the wholesale upheaval of existing institutions—and privileges. From its beginning, then, libertarianism has attracted a mix of radical and reactionary elements: those who were eager to follow the dictates of libertarian justice wherever they might lead, and those who saw in libertarianism a rationale for defending the status quo against change. The tension between progressive and reactionary elements, a tension within the very soul of libertarianism, is the major theme of this book.

The difficulty in reconciling these conflicting tendencies would become vivid in the twentieth-century United States, when the rise of international and expansionist socialism led many libertarians to align themselves with conservatives against their common threat. This is the version of libertarianism that we expect will be familiar to contemporary readers. The focus on socialism as a threat to

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liberty, notably in the writings of European immigrants such as Ludwig von Mises, F. A. Hayek, and Ayn Rand, led to the development of an American libertarianism starkly different in form from the nineteenth-century individualist anarchism of Benjamin Tucker and Lysander Spooner. That earlier form of libertarianism, born out of opposition to slavery, was radical to its core. Twentieth-century American libertarianism, by contrast, resembled far more the mix of radical and reactionary elements that characterized nineteenth-century French and British libertarianism than it did its own direct U.S. antecedent.

By the mid-twentieth century, the struggle against socialism came to dominate the libertarian worldview. As a result, for many libertarians of the Cold War era, *economic* liberty came close to representing liberty as such. For example, if facing a choice between supporting civil liberties or economic liberties, economic liberties always trumped—or so most libertarians of that era believed. This emphasis affected which threats to liberty the Cold War era libertarians were quick to spot and which they were slow to see (or, perhaps, could not see at all). This shift in emphasis, as we shall see, significantly shaped the way libertarianism is currently perceived.

A few words about our project. This book is a history of libertarian ideas. It offers neither a history of libertarian politics nor a history of the libertarian movement.[1] It is an *intellectual* history. Further, this book offers an intellectual *history* of libertarianism and not a philosophical defense. Our task, as we see it, is to report the ideas and arguments of libertarians just as we find them. Except for a few places where we explicitly say otherwise, we make no sustained attempt to strengthen old arguments or develop new ones.

Moreover, because this is a history of *libertarian* ideas, our treatment of nonlibertarian ideologies and figures will be brief. This book discusses the ideas of classical liberals like John Locke and Adam Smith insofar as those ideas influenced later libertarian thought. But this book does not intend to provide a thorough overview of those ideas, or of classical liberalism more generally. Similarly, while there are close connections between libertarianism and neoliberalism, as well as between libertarianism and the Austrian, Virginia, and Chicago schools of economics, the primary focus of this book is not the people or ideas associated with those

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movements and institutions.[2] True, this book may well be seen as a complement (or corrective) to the growing body of scholarship in these areas by showing their relationship to libertarianism. But it is libertarianism, and not these other areas, that is our concern.

Although this is a history, we have chosen not to organize the book chronologically. Instead, we have structured the book around a number of topics—poverty, anarchism, race relations, and so on—and devoted a chapter to each. For each topic, we explore how libertarians of different eras (and in different places) took divergent paths from common principles. By focusing on topics instead of chronology, our book seeks to *show* the history of libertarian thought rather than merely tell it.

Our topical approach will also make vivid the pluralist and idiosyncratic character of libertarian thinking. This will be a constant theme of our book: there is no single libertarianism. As we see it, libertarianism cannot be defined by any one set of necessary and sufficient conditions. Instead, libertarianism is best understood as a cluster concept. We see libertarianism as a distinctive combination of six key commitments: property rights, negative liberty, individualism, free markets, a skepticism of authority, and a belief in the explanatory and normative significance of spontaneous order. Chapter 1 introduces each of these six concepts, shows how libertarians interpret them, and explains how, when brought together into an integrated set, they form a distinct and recognizably libertarian approach.

Understanding libertarianism as an (integrated) cluster of related concepts helps us understand why the view could take such different forms in the hands of its various proponents. This is because, first, each of the concepts within that cluster is subject to a range of plausible interpretations. With respect to private property, for example, libertarians can disagree about what sorts of things a person may legitimately own, what particular rights over things are entailed by owning them, and in what circumstances (if any) property rights must give way to competing claims or interests. Second, libertarians can disagree about how the different elements of the cluster fit together. Are property rights *foundational* to the libertarian worldview? Or are they merely one important idea among many? Different interpretations of the six key concepts,

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and different ways of combining those concepts into an integrated whole, lead to divergent yet equally "libertarian" conclusions.

If this analysis is correct, then a common way of thinking about libertarianism is mistaken. It is often claimed that libertarianism is a simple ideology, the dictates of which can be logically deduced from first principles. There can be power in simplicity, and some people find libertarianism attractive precisely for that reason. By contrast, our analysis suggests that libertarianism is an inherently flexible ideology, one that can be developed (or bent) in different ways, depending on the interests, preoccupations, or social context of the theorist. Behind the mask of timeless logic, there is judgment work—with all the variable strengths and flaws that attend the exercise of that human capacity.

Most important, our approach helps explain why libertarianism has always contained a mixture of radical and reactionary elements. An emphasis on private property and skepticism of government power could be, and was, used by radical libertarians to argue that slavery is a uniquely grotesque violation of individual self-ownership, and must be abolished immediately. But those same ideas could also be, and were, used by later libertarians to defend Southern segregation against "tyrannical" attempts by the federal government to dismantle it.[3]

After introducing libertarianism in chapter 1, we turn to introducing the three major periods or waves of libertarian thought. The first, "primordial" era covers the latter half of the nineteenth century, with special focus on Britain, France, and the United States. The second "Cold War" era runs from the 1930s through the 1980s and mainly centers in the United States. Finally, and more tentatively, we discuss the emerging "Third Wave" of libertarianism.

The narrative arc of our history is easy to trace: emerging in the nineteenth century as an idealistic and progressive radicalization of classical liberalism, libertarianism had by the second half of the twentieth century taken on a more conservative, perhaps even reactionary, status quo–preserving cast. The current "Third Wave" period of libertarianism is marked by a struggle to define the future direction of libertarian thought, with tensions between historical libertarianism's radical and reactionary tendencies front and center.

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The main body of our book, chapters 3–8, has a dual organizational structure. In each chapter, we explore how one of our six libertarian family *commitments* informs the libertarian response to one of six chosen political *topics*. For example, chapter 3, on the questions of land and labor, addresses these topics through the lens of the libertarian commitment to property. Chapter 4, on the topic of anarchism, also deals with the libertarian skepticism of authority. Chapter 5, on business, is also about the libertarian commitment to free markets. Chapter 6, on poverty, also discusses spontaneous order. Chapter 7, on race, does so in light of the libertarian commitment to individualism. And chapter 8, on global justice, examines that topic through the libertarian commitment to negative liberty.

Before we begin, we believe we owe our readers a word about the ideological perspective from which this book is written. We both have long identified ourselves as libertarians. Indeed, it was the attraction we feel toward many of the ideas and thinkers discussed in this book that led us to take up this project. We have spent almost a decade in conversation and in the study of these ideas. In some ways, the exploration has deepened our love of them, revealing new insights, fresh perspectives, and forgotten figures. In other ways, our attraction has been challenged, as libertarian arguments and outlooks that once seemed solid now appear weaker: historical study has a way of doing that, and to political ideologies of every hue.

Whether inspiring or disappointing, the history of libertarian ideas has never failed to surprise us. The intellectual tradition we thought we knew is deeper, richer, and more diverse than either of us expected. Exploring that diversity has led us to question many beliefs we once took for granted, and to better understand and appreciate libertarianism for what it is—the parts that are ugly, and the parts that are beautiful too. We hope this book can do the same for you.

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