



ON THE SPREAD OF (CLASSICAL) LIBERAL IDEAS

*In this Liberty Matters online discussion forum we explore a number of issues concerning the role ideas have had in changing societies by examining several historical examples such as the anti-slavery movement in Britain and America in the first half of the 19th century, [Richard Cobden](#) and the free trade movement, and the rebirth of classical liberal and free market ideas after the Second World War. In the Lead Essay David Hart surveys the field of ideological movements and present a theory of ideological production and distribution based upon Austrian capital theory as it might be applied to the production of ideas. The commentators are Stephen Davies who is education director at the [Institute of Economic Affairs](#) in London; David Gordon who is a Senior Fellow at the [Mises Institute](#); Jason Kuznicki who is a Research Fellow at the Cato Institute and Editor, [Cato Unbound](#); Peter Mentzel who is a Senior Fellow at Liberty Fund; Jim Powell who is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute; George H. Smith who is an independent scholar and contributor to [libertarianism.org](#); and Jeffrey Tucker who is a distinguished fellow at the [Foundation for Economic Education](#), editor at *Laissez Faire Books*, and founder of *Liberty.me* <http://liberty.me/>.*

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by David M. Hart



An 18th century cartoon showing the burden on the peasants of the aristocracy, church, and state.

Hayek's Despair at the End of World War Two

At the height of the war in 1944, when what had once been relatively free market societies had been turned into

government planned and regulated war economies, the economist Friedrich Hayek penned a desperate warning - if such heavy planning, regulation, and taxation was not soon brought to an end England and America were well and truly “on the road to serfdom”.^[1] He followed this up 5 years later with an essay, “The Intellectuals and Socialism” which has become a kind of gospel for libertarian and free market groups ever since as they grappled with the sad fact that they were in such a small minority while all around them, other intellectuals and scholars were socialists and interventionists of various kinds. I remember vividly in the 1970s when I first became involved with these ideas, we used to wonder how to convince our friends and colleagues what a wonderful thing individual liberty really was, a veritable “liberal utopia”, as Hayek eloquently phrased it:

Does this mean that freedom is valued only when it is lost, that the world must everywhere go through a dark phase of socialist totalitarianism before the forces of freedom can gather strength anew? It may be so, but I hope it need not be. Yet, so long as the people who over longer periods determine public opinion continue to be attracted by the ideals of socialism,

the trend will continue. If we are to avoid such a development, we must be able to offer a new liberal program which appeals to the imagination. We must make the building of a free society once more an intellectual adventure, a deed of courage. What we lack is a liberal Utopia, a program which seems neither a mere defense of things as they are nor a diluted kind of socialism, but a truly liberal radicalism which does not spare the susceptibilities of the mighty (including the trade unions), which is not too severely practical, and which does not confine itself to what appears today as politically possible. We need intellectual leaders who are willing to work for an ideal, however small may be the prospects of its early realization. They must be men who are willing to stick to principles and to fight for their full realization, however remote. The practical compromises they must leave to the politicians. Free trade and freedom of opportunity are ideals which still may arouse the imaginations of large numbers, but a mere “reasonable freedom of trade” or a mere “relaxation of controls” is neither intellectually respectable nor likely to inspire any enthusiasm.

The main lesson which the true liberal must learn from the success of the socialists is that it was their courage to be Utopian which gained them the support of the intellectuals and therefore an influence on public opinion which is daily making possible what only recently seemed utterly remote. Those who have concerned themselves exclusively with what seemed practicable in the existing state of opinion have constantly found that even this had rapidly become politically impossible as the result of changes in a public opinion which they have done nothing to guide. Unless we can make the philosophic foundations of a free society once more a living intellectual issue, and its implementation a task which challenges the ingenuity and imagination of our liveliest minds. But if we can regain that belief in the power of

ideas which was the mark of liberalism at its best, the battle is not lost. The intellectual revival of liberalism is already underway in many parts of the world. Will it be in time?[\[2\]](#)

Nearly 70 years later, we have less reason to be as pessimistic as Hayek was then as we have witnessed in the meantime a significant growth of free market and libertarian individuals, groups, institutes, books, journals, and even rap videos. However, as historically aware individuals we know that this has not been the first time that a pro-liberty movement has emerged, that previous attempts to build a free society were attempted, were partly successful, and that many of them failed and sank into oblivion. Will this happen as well to the current movement? Can we learn from the past, both how the successes were achieved, why they failed, and what might make for another successful movement in the future.



Friedrich von Hayek

This Liberty Matters discussion follows on from two earlier ones: one in November 2013 on “Arthur Seldon and the Institute of Economic Affairs” and another in January 2015 on “Richard Cobden: Ideas and Strategies in Organizing the Free-Trade Movement in Britain”.[\[3\]](#) In those discussions we wanted to study in greater detail a couple of specific examples of how pro-

liberty ideas were developed and then used to bring about political and economic change in a pro-liberty direction. The first study was how Arthur Seldon and Ralph Harris began the Institute of Economic Affairs in post-war Britain (1955), developed a research and publication program to disseminate these ideas, and how these ideas gradually came to influence politicians like Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. The second study examined how Cobden was able to organise one of the most successful single issue movements in the modern history of liberty, namely the repeal in 1846 of the protectionist Corn Laws in England. What I would like to do in the present discussion is to broaden the scope of our analysis to include other movements in the past which have sought to bring about a freer society, especially those movements which some success in moving towards this goal.

What I would like to do in this opening salvo of the discussion is to lay the groundwork in an expansive and rather open-ended way, firstly by listing a large number of general questions about how societies change, and the role which ideas and individuals play in bringing about that change (see Appendix 1: Questions about the Relationships between Ideas and Radical Social Change); secondly, by listing the (surprisingly) large number of historical examples of radical intellectual and political change over the past 2,000 years (both in a pro-liberty and anti-liberty direction), along with some of the key individuals and events involved (see Appendix 2: Historical Examples of Radical Change in Ideas and Political Structures); and finally, a list of some of the institutions, individuals, and events which have arisen to further the cause of liberty since Hayek wrote his appeal for intellectuals to rediscover the utopian promise of liberty (see Appendix 3: The Spread of Pro-Liberty Ideas in the Post-WW2 Period). I hope the other contributors to this discussion will help me flesh out these lists so they are more complete.

I would then like to offer an analysis of intellectual and social change based upon the Austrian theory of the structure of production, in which the production of ideas replaces that of the production of goods. I will argue that, just as in the real economy, a pro-liberty movement

requires the creation of raw materials (liberal theory), investors who will provide funding, entrepreneurs who can identify profit opportunities and organise production, a salesforce who can persuade consumers to buy the product, and of course consumers to buy the product.

In the final section is a brief discussion of what most classical liberal and libertarian intellectuals and scholars have largely avoided thinking about in any depth, namely developing strategies for achieving radical intellectual and political change based upon their knowledge of history, economics, and the science of human action. I conclude with a half-serious, half-lighthearted list of the various strategies which have been adopted over the centuries to achieve a free society (see Appendix 4: List of Different Kinds of Strategies for Change: From Retreatism to Cadre-Building and Beyond). I hope my fellow discussants will be able and willing to add to the list!

Surveying the Territory

We need to consider a number of general questions about how societies change, and the role which ideas and individuals play in bringing about that change. These include, how do ideas about liberty develop and how do they spread? what role do individuals play? what groups are interested in change in a pro-liberty direction? who are the vested interests who oppose change in a pro-liberty direction? what are the relative costs and benefits of organising dissent against the old order and how do they change over time? how successful have been “top down” (elite) attempts at reform? how successful have been “bottom up” (popular) reforms? how long does it take for new and radical ideas to go from conception to inception? for classical liberals what are the required objective and subjective conditions for successful change?

For a fuller list of these and other related questions, see Appendix 1: Questions about the Relationships between Ideas and Radical Social Change, below.

Historians have many excellent examples of successful radical change in ideas and political and economic structures, in both a pro-liberty and anti-liberty direction. They include the spread of Christianity, the Enlightenment, the American and French Revolutions,

the anti-slavery movement, the Free Trade Movement, and many others (see Appendix 2: Historical Examples of Radical Change in Ideas and Political Structures). Also see my own “Study Guides on the Classical Liberal Tradition”[\[4\]](#) as well as Jim Powell’s excellent *The Triumph of Liberty: A 2,000-Year History* (2000) and Steve Davies’ “Introduction” to the *The Encyclopedia of Libertarianism* (2008).[\[5\]](#) The articles in the *Encyclopedia of Libertarianism* on key individuals and historical movements are also essential reading (see bibliography for a full list).[\[6\]](#)

Closer to our own time, we can also point to several examples of the successful spread of pro-liberty ideas in the post-Second World War period (see Appendix 3: The Spread of Pro-Liberty Ideas in the Post-WW2 Period for a more detailed list). I think we can identify four waves or generations of pro-liberty organizations and groups which were founded during this period to confront particular issues at particular times but which also shared the more general goal of spreading knowledge about individual liberty and free markets. The First Generation during the 1940s was concerned about rebuilding the classical liberal movement after the devastation of WW2, a strategy which might be termed the discovery and preservation of “The Remnant”; the Second Generation was active during the 1950 and 1960s and busied itself with establishing a variety of educational and publishing institutes and foundations, or a strategy of “Hayekian Educationism”; the Third Generation in the 1970s and 1980s saw the creation of many public policy and outreach programs, or a policy of “Converting the Senior Bureaucrats” combined with “Reverse Fabianism”; and the Fourth Generation in which we are now living has a much more diverse range of activities, several of which take advantage of the internet to disseminate ideas, or a strategy of “let a thousand electronic flowers bloom”.

For more information on these groups, see Brian Doherty’s *Radicals for Capitalism* (2007) for details[\[7\]](#) and the relevant articles in *The Encyclopedia of Libertarianism*.

Strategies for Achieving Radical Change

Hayek vs. Rothbard

There has been surprisingly little analysis by classical liberals and libertarians of past movements for intellectual and political change and what they might teach us in the present. One might well ask, where is our Antonio Gramsci? Friedrich Hayek outlined his strategy for promoting liberal and free market ideas in “The Intellectuals and Socialism” based upon his analysis of how socialism had become so successful in his lifetime. This essay has been enormously influential in guiding the activities of the Liberty Fund and the Institute for Humane Studies, amongst other institutions. It was written at a time when classical liberals ideas and movement were particularly weak following WW2 and Hayek reflects this with his short term pessimism and very long-term prognosis about the role of intellectuals in changing the climate of opinion. Remember, he had only recently published the warning *The Road to Serfdom* in 1944. His strategy might be termed “Very Long Term Educationism” since he believes that it will take decades or a couple of lifetimes before the ideas of free market economists like him begin to trickle down through academia, into the ranks of journalism, and then be considered for inclusion in policies drawn up by elected politicians. There is also an element of “Reverse Fabianism” in that he hopes to do for liberal ideas what George Bernard Shaw and other English intellectuals did for socialism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.



Murray N. Rothbard

The libertarian economist Murray Rothbard on the other hand, beginning in the mid-1970s, has given much thought to the problem of strategy but his work is not well known. His ideas need to be taken seriously because the rise of the modern libertarian movement to a large degree took place in NYC in the 1950s and 1960s (Mises seminar at NYU, the Rand salon, the Circle Bastiat, his and Liggio's activities in the anti-Vietnam war movement, the first libertarian scholars conference, etc) and as a participant in those events his observations should carry some weight. In an unpublished and "strictly confidential" manuscript from April 1977^[8] he goes into some detail about the strategies used in the past to achieve radical change, ranging from libertarian movements like the American Revolution, the Philosophic Radicals around James Mill,^[9] and William Lloyd Garrison and the abolitionist movement;^[10] to totalitarian groups like the Lenin and the Bolsheviks, and the Nazi Party. He advises for the libertarian movement the creation of a Leninist style "cadre" of committed and knowledgeable individuals who understand both the theory of liberty as well as how it might be implemented in practice in the political world. It should be noted that Rothbard wrote this memorandum at a time when he hoped to turn the fledgling Libertarian Party into one modelled on his theory of "cadres" before he split acrimoniously with Koch and the Cato Institute and then gave up the idea of shaping the LP in his Millian-Leninist image. In spite of this political failure, his historical and theoretical reflections in my view still deserve attention by historians and political theorists. To answer the question Lenin himself asked in 1902 "What is to be done?", we can say that we need more case studies of successful ideological movements, especially pro-liberty ones, like the ones I have listed in Appendix 2.^[11]

Rothbard's writings on strategy provoked several discussions both inside and outside the Libertarian Party, such as the shortened version which was published for the "Radical Caucus" of the Libertarian Party "Strategies For A Libertarian Victory",^[12] and the special edition of *Libertarian Review* (Aug. 1978) entitled "Toward the Second American Revolution: Libertarian Strategies for Today" which included essays on strategy by Milton

Mueller, Murray Rothbard, Ed Crane, Leonard Liggio, Charles Koch, Bill Evers, and David Theroux.^[13]

Rothbard's strategic theory might be pursued at greater length in a future post in this discussion, especially his Millian-Leninism and its appropriateness for a movement based upon individual liberty, free markets, and individual responsibility.

Some Observations from History about Strategy

What I have found useful in studying this matter is Austrian capital theory developed by Hayek and Mises,^[14] in particular the notion of "the structure of production of goods" - if we understand in this context that "goods" are "intellectual goods" or ideas and not raw materials or machinery. Before we can distribute goods to consumers (first order goods) we have to have a structure of production of goods ranging from the highest order (such as raw materials), to various intermediate orders (such the production of machines for factories, the factories which produce the final goods, and the trucks and logistics to get the goods to their final destination), and then the shops on main street which sell the final order of goods to consumers. For this structure of production of goods to exist, we need investors with a low time preference who are willing to invest their capital in the various stages, we need entrepreneurs who can bring together the funds, skilled personnel, and managerial talent to produce the appropriate goods at each stage of production, and we need a sales force who can persuade consumer to buy their particular product from among all the others goods made by competitors.



Ludwig von Mises

When we apply this analysis to the spread of classical liberal ideas it becomes apparent that a successful movement needs all of the following types of individuals and activities:

- individuals who are capable of supplying the intellectual raw materials (the theory of liberty as applied to economics, politics, and society)
- investors who are willing to provide the financial means for these ideas to be produced and distributed to others
- entrepreneurs who can identify a market opportunity (a “strategic issue”) and can organise all the components needed for the production and distribution of ideas for different types of markets (scholarly, general interest, education, mass market)
- a salesforce (marketers, advertisers, salespeople) who can persuade the consumers of ideas to buy this particular product in a competitive market for ideas
- consumers who buy our products (ideas)

One might ask, might the state distort this structure of the production of ideas, just as it distorts the investment of capital in the structure of production of economic

goods by manipulating interest rates and the money supply? I do not have space to go into this question here, other than to suggest that the biggest distortion it creates is the supply of government schools and universities which “crowd out” both private suppliers of educational services, but perhaps more importantly, crowds out “unwelcome ideas” which support the free market and individual liberty.

From what I have said above I believe we can identify the following patterns in the way pro-liberty advocates have organised their activities in the past. Not all groups have proceeded in this way but they have used various components in their efforts and historians and social theorists might be able to construct a better model for intellectual and social change in the future by studying their activities.

The First Steps

- “gather the Remnant” - there is a need to identify and find like-minded people
- find investors who are willing to fund long term intellectual and political activities

Promote liberal scholarship (highest order production of ideas)

- encourage and fund highly original theorists (Mises, Hayek, Rothbard)
- place scholars in colleges and universities
- publish books, articles, hold conferences
- provide scholarships for interested students
- start graduate programs for scholars and future teachers

Create centres and institutes to disseminate liberal ideas among intellectuals, journalists, and political elites (middle/second order of production of ideas)

- public policy groups which criticise existing government policies and offer alternatives
- produce monographs and policy proposals showing how to liberalise the economy

- produce magazines, organise talks, write op ed pieces for newspapers, appear on TV

Create associations, organisations, parties to agitate and lobby for liberal change (first order)

- outreach to voters, students, and activists
- intellectual material which is suitable for the average educated reader
- create single issue lobby groups to put pressure on government to repeal legislation
- campus organisations
- organise direct action to oppose unjust laws

One Historical Example: The Anti-Corn Law League

I would now like to show how this “structure of the production of ideas” can be applied to a specific historical case study, namely the Anti-Corn Law League (ACLL) 1838–1846, which I regard as the text-book example of the strategy of “Single Causism”.[\[15\]](#)



Adam Smith

(Highest) Fourth Order: the intellectual groundwork for free trade was done by Adam Smith in his treatise *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). This theoretical work was

continued by many other classical economists in the early part of the 19th century like David Ricardo, James Mill, and J.R. McCulloch where the idea of free trade became a core component of the classical school of economics.

Third Order: Other classical economists and intellectuals gave lectures and wrote books and pamphlets on free trade; People like Thomas Hodgskin gave lectures to popular audiences at Mechanics Institutes and published books; Thomas Peronnet Thompson wrote books and pamphlets for middle brow audiences.

Second Order: Members of the Board of Trade had become influenced by Smithian free market ideas, there were sympathetic MPs in the Conservative Party who were prepared to argue in favour of free trade in the House of Commons and to vote for the repeal of the Corn laws, the Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel was won over to the free trade cause and organised a vote on it. Wilson started *The Economist* magazine to promote free trade ideas.

First Order: Cobden’s and the ACLL’s genius was to see how ordinary people could be organised to put pressure on the government. The ACLL realised that the recent dramatic drop in the price of postage (the Uniform Penny Post) meant that they could distribute their printed material at a much lower cost than previously. He created membership cards for the ACLL so people could show their allegiance; envelopes for personal letters with ACLL designs and slogans were sold (merchandising); bazaars were held to sell other ACLL merchandise; signature drives were organised to demonstrate the scale of public support to MPs; large public meetings were held; there was wide distribution of magazine and pamphlets. [\[16\]](#)

I do not believe that this structure of production of ideas was a deliberate creation of any one of the individuals involved in the free trade movement. It seemed to have evolved without a great deal of conscious strategic planning. According to my schema we can identify the following key roles:

- the creator of the “raw materials”: Adam Smith in his treatise *The Wealth of Nations*, and his followings in the Classical school of economics

- the investors: Richard Cobden and his fellow cotton manufacturers who funded the organisation
- the entrepreneurs: Cobden was very good at identifying legislative opportunities for the free traders, and showed great skill in designing the best way to market the ideas to the general public (the symbol of the “big loaf” vs. “the small loaf”; James Wilson who founded *The Economist* magazine in 1843 to spread free market ideas
- the salesforce: lecturers like Hodgskin, Thompson; politicians like Villiers and Cobden who gave speeches in the house; the journalists who wrote articles the magazine *The League*
- the consumers: those ordinary people who voted for free trade candidates; signed petitions to parliament; attended large public meetings in support of free trade

The question we might ask ourselves, is whether or not a structure of the production of ideas like this is necessary for any significant intellectual and social/political/economic change to occur? How many examples can we find from history where something like this structure appeared, and how many took place without this kind of structure? If we can, how do explain the creation, dissemination, and impact of ideas in those cases?

A further question to consider is how long it takes for ideas to move from the Highest Fourth Order or stage of high theory production to the First Order or stage where the ideas get put into practice and pro-liberty reforms are enacted? In the case of free trade there was a 70 year period between the publication of Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776) and the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. Is this a typical time frame? What other examples can historians find?

One might get depressed if one counted the years since the appearance of Mises’ *Human Action* in 1949 and the current state of monetary and banking policy in the West - some 65 years. On the other hand, the appearance of

Rothbard’s *For a New Liberty* in 1974 and the ensuing growth of the modern libertarian movement over the following 40 years might give one cause to be more optimistic.



A final question to consider is to compare the success of classical liberals in England in abolishing slavery (1808 and 1833) and repealing the protectionist Corn Laws (1846) with the failure of liberals to do the same in the United States. There, the slave trade was ended but slavery itself proved to be a much harder nut to crack and the sad conclusion one might have to make is that ideological and political agitation was not enough to overcome the vested interests of the slaveowners and the apathy of the voting public, and that slavery only ended as a result of a very violent and destructive war. The failure of the American free traders is another example which needs to be studied in greater detail. Jean-Baptiste Say’s free trade ideas in his *Treatise* (English translation 1821) were taught in American colleges for decades but this did not produce a broadly based free trade movement (although there was an American Free Trade Association with branches in Chicago and New York which republished many of Bastiat’s free trade writings) and the U.S. remained a protectionist nation for the entire 19th century with some of the highest rates of tariffs in the world.^[17] So on two counts, on issues which practically defined what it meant to be a classical liberal at this time - free trade and opposition to slavery - the U.S. liberals were found wanting and failed.

Conclusion: Some Outstanding Historical Examples of Investors, Entrepreneurs and Salespeople of Ideas

I would like to conclude this already long essay on an upward beat by listing some of the outstanding examples of individuals who have played key roles in the classical liberal movement over the past 200 years. I believe that any successful movement requires individuals like these in all of the main areas of activity if it is to be successful. The problem seems to be that it is in fact a rare occurrence for a movement to have such individuals in each stage of the production of ideas at the same time.

Investors

- Harold Luhn and the William Volker Fund
- Antony Fisher and IEA and Atlas^[18]
- Pierre Goodrich and Liberty fund^[19]
- Charles Koch and Cato Institute and other groups

Entrepreneurs

- Thomas Clarkson: the British Anti-Slavery movement
- Guillaumin: the French political economists
- Richard Cobden: the English free trade movement
- Arthur Seldon and Ralph Harris: the IEA in London
- Leonard Read: FEE
- Baldy Harper: IHS
- Antony Fisher: IEA and Atlas
- Ed Crane: Cato Institute

Salespeople

- Frédéric Bastiat: free trade journalism
- Ayn Rand: best-selling novels
- Milton Friedman: “Free to Choose” TV series and book
- Ron Paul: presidential campaigns

Endnotes

^[1.] Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (The University of Chicago Press, 1944, 1976). Also Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom, with The Intellectuals and Socialism. The Condensed Version of The Road to Serfdom as it appeared in the April 1945 edition of Reader's Digest* (London: The Institute of Economic Affairs, 2005). With “The Road to Serfdom in Cartoons”. Originally published in *Look* magazine. See, Alan Ebenstein, *Friedrich Hayek: A Biography* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

^[2.] F.A. Hayek, “The Intellectuals and Socialism” in *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics* (The University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 178–94. Quote from p. 194. Online at [mises.org](http://mises.org/etexts/hayekintellectuals.pdf) <http://mises.org/etexts/hayekintellectuals.pdf>.

^[3.] John Blundell, “Arthur Seldon and the Institute of Economic Affairs” (November, 2013) </pages/seldon-and-the-iea>; Stephen Davies, “Richard Cobden: Ideas and Strategies in Organizing the Free-Trade Movement in Britain” (January 2015) </pages/lm-cobden>.

^[4.] My own efforts to list some of these movements can be found at my personal website. See, David M. Hart, “Study Guides on the Classical Liberal Tradition” <http://davidmhart.com/liberty/Guides/ClassicalLiberalism/index.html>. These include a concept map showing the key ideas of the classical liberal tradition, and *A History of Classical Liberalism in Three Parts*: Part 1: Twelve Keys Concepts of the Classical Liberal Tradition; Part 2: Ideological Movements and Key Political Events; Part 3: Quotations from Key Texts Illustrating Classical Liberal Ideas.

^[5.] Jim Powell, *The Triumph of Liberty: A 2,000-Year History, told through the Lives' of Freedom's Greatest Champions* New York: The Free Press, 2000). Steve Davies’ “General Introduction,” *The Encyclopedia of Libertarianism*, pp. xxv-xxxvii, which is an excellent survey of the ideas, movements, and key events in the development of liberty.

^[6.] *The Encyclopedia of Libertarianism*, ed. Ronald Hamowy (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008. A Project of the Cato Institute).

Most of the key articles are listed in my “Study Guides on the Classical Liberal Tradition”.

[7.] Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freenheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement* (New York: Public Affairs, Perseus Books Group, 2007).

[8.] Murray N. Rothbard, *Toward a Strategy for Libertarian Social Change* (April, 1977), available on my website <davidmhart.com/liberty/OtherWorks/Rothbard/Rothbard_1977TowardStrategy.pdf> [PDF 6.9 MB]. See also, Murray N. Rothbard, “Concepts of the Role of Intellectuals in Social Change Toward Laissez-Faire,” *The Journal of libertarian Studies*, vol. IX, no. 2 (Fall 1990), pp. 43–67, <davidmhart.com/liberty/OtherWorks/Rothbard/Rothbard_1990IntellectualsSocialChange.pdf> [PDF 1.3 MB]; Rothbard also condensed some of these ideas into Part V: “Toward A Theory of Strategy for Liberty.” “30. Toward A Theory of Strategy for Liberty” in *The Ethics of Liberty*, pp. 257–273. <davidmhart.com/liberty/OtherWorks/Rothbard/Rothbard_1998TheoryStrategy.pdf> [PDF 438 KB] From, Murray N. Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty*. With a New Introduction by Hans-Hermann Hoppe (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

[9.] See, Joseph Hamburger, *Intellectuals in Politics: John Stuart Mill and the Philosophic Radicals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965).

[10.] See, Aileen S. Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and his Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834–1850* New York: Pantheon Books, 1969).

[11.] Vladimir Lenin, *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* (1901, 1902). Lenin’s *Collected Works*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961, Moscow, Volume 5, pp. 347–530. <https://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/index.htm> or PDF <https://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/download/what-itd.pdf>.

[12.] Murray N. Rothbard, “Strategies For A Libertarian Victory” (Libertarian Party. Rothbard (sic) Caucus) (February 2004) <http://www.lprc.org/strategies.html>.

This is an online version of Rothbard’s essay which first appeared in *Libertarian Review* (August, 1978). With an epilog dated July, 1982.

[13.] *Libertarian Review*, Special Issue entitled “Toward the Second American Revolution: Libertarian Strategies for Today,” Aug. 1978, vol. 7, no.7, Murray Rothbard, “Strategies for a Libertarian Victory,” pp. 18–24, 34. <http://www.libertarianism.org/lr/LR788.pdf>.

[14.] Hayek, *The Pure Theory of Capital* (1941) in *The Collected Works of F.A. Hayek. Volume 12, The Pure Theory of Capital (1941)*, edited by Lawrence H. White (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2007). Ludwig von Mises, “Part I. Human Action. CHAPTER 4: A First Analysis of the Category of Action” in *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics, in 4 vols.*, ed. Bettina Bien Greaves (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2007). Vol. 1. [/titles/1893#Mises_3843-01_388](https://www.mises.org/story/388).

[15.] See the Liberty Matters discussion, Stephen Davies, “Richard Cobden: Ideas and Strategies in Organizing the Free-Trade Movement in Britain” (January 2015) [/pages/lm-cobden](https://libertymatters.com/pages/lm-cobden).

[16.] See the illustrated essay “Cobden and the Anti-Corn Law League” [/pages/cobden-and-the-anti-corn-law-league](https://libertymatters.com/pages/cobden-and-the-anti-corn-law-league).

[17.] Jean Baptiste Say, *A Treatise on Political Economy; or the production, distribution, and consumption of wealth. Translated from the 4th ed. of the French by C.R. Prinsep. To which is added, a translation of the introduction and additional notes, by Clement C. Biddle* (Boston, Wells and Lilly, 1821). Also see my paper, “The Liberal Roots of American Conservatism: Bastiat and the French Connection,” given to the Philadelphia Society meeting March 27–29, 2015.

[18.] Gerald Frost, *Antony Fisher: Champion of Liberty* (London: Profile Books, 2002).

[19.] Dane Starbuck, *The Goodriches: An American Family* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001). [/titles/1065](https://www.mises.org/story/1065).

DOES THE STRUCTURE OF PRODUCTION APPLY TO IDEAS?

by Jeffrey Tucker

Sometime in the late 1980s, I found myself in a mild debate with Murray Rothbard over matters of strategy. It was an exchange of private letters. I cannot recall the specifics but the issue had something to do with how broad or narrow an ideological journal, with the goal of propagating a body of ideas, ought to be in order to achieve its goals. Should it encourage broad debate, or try overtly to advance a particular plumbline of thought? Should it be an advocate of one point of view and thereby exclusionary, or a venue inclusive of many points of view including radical ones that mainline publications eschew?



Murray N. Rothbard

After some back and forth, Rothbard concluded our correspondence with a general observation that I can only paraphrase. He did not believe that he somehow had all the right answers to the strategic question. He was highly interested in more discussion of this topic and happy to have the subject raised. To his mind what mattered was that the strategy, whatever it is, a) not be immoral or be based on some fundamental lie, and b) worked to achieve the result. Despite his reputation as a cadre-enforcing Leninist in the 1970s -- or perhaps

because he had seen the failure of that program, as David Hart mentions -- his own attitude was highly flexible on strategic matters. He had his preferences, but he didn't rule out other ways of going about things so long as they were not immoral and held out some possibility of success.

I've always kept that in mind in the course of modern debates on strategy. People can become wildly passionate about this topic, pushing their own view as if there is only one way. If you vote, you are evil; if you don't vote, you are not helping the cause. If you eschew academia, you are not invested in serious ideas; if you are in academia, you have sold out. If you don't protest in the streets, you are unwilling to get your hands dirty; if you do protest in the streets, you are contributing to the problem of mobocracy. And so on. People suppose they have the right way, and it is the only way.

This is one reason I can't but celebrate Hart's creative list of 16 various strategies for social change. It shows just how many theories have been spawned in the last 65 years, a period in which which liberty has suffered so many blows. If we knew the right answers, and if we had seen some particular strategic outlook prevail over the others, matters would be more simple. But we've rarely seen such progress. Ludwig von Mises wrote in his private diary that he wondered whether his dreams of being a reformer had given over to becoming a "historian of decline." I suspect many people feel that way.

And yet, as we look around the world today, with the state still on the march, we do see a new flourishing of liberty. How to measure this? The least-revealing way is to look at the number of libertarian organizations and academics. Surely it is better to look at the actual progress of liberty itself. Here we see massive gains through communication technology, life opportunities, the decline of violence, the decline of poverty, the globalization of the division of labor, and the effective realization of universal rights in more places in the world than ever before. How is this happening? Enterprise is outpacing the the ability of the state of keep up with regulating it. As to how and why enterprise has done so much so fast, I see no one particular causal agent. As Hart notes, "The world being

a complex and messy place, there is probably no one strategy that will be successful in all places and all times.” The implications of this observation are profound. Just as we cannot anticipate the emergent shape of social institutions under conditions of freedom, we cannot anticipate, much less plan, the way in which liberty-centered ideas will bring about social and political change. We think we know, but then, as it turns out, we don’t know.

This is why I have fundamental doubts about this idea of applying to the world of ideas the structure of production as it pertains to the physical world. It strikes me as too constructivist, affected, and planned. More than that, there are important reasons why the model might be fundamentally flawed. Ideas move through time and space in a way that is completely different from the physical world. The danger in conflating these two very different spheres of the world is that we actually limit the power of ideas rather than unleash them.

To see why this is the case, ask why there is a structure of production at all. Goods need to be produced. Once they are consumed, they must be produced again. Production takes time and that production must be coordinated across many layers of cooperative industrial structures: capital goods, intermediate goods, and consumer goods. Institutions such as prices and interest rates assist in this coordinative process. The process is arduous but necessary to overcome the inherent privations of the state of nature. To rise above it requires the employment of scarce means to achieve unlimited wants, and this process of production must keep economics constantly in mind.

But what is the fundamental fact that makes these production structures necessary? Why can’t we just have all the stuff we want without having to build these intertemporally complex systems? The reason comes down to scarcity itself. If that condition did not exist, we could dispense with production structures completely.

If it were possible to make gasoline, steaks, and sneakers just one time, and these goods could somehow replicate themselves unto infinity once produced, the whole economics of production would be moot. None of the factors that give rise to it would exist.

Consider: ideas are not scarce in an economic sense. Once produced -- and that production can take a decades or only an instant -- an idea can be infinitely reproduced, just as Thomas Jefferson said of fire itself. It does not depreciate in value as physical property does. It can belong to, and be consumed by, one person or billions of people at the same instant. An idea is also immortal: the ideas produced by Plato or Einstein are available forever. An idea is also malleable: it can be changed and remixed with other ideas by any individual mind, without disturbing the integrity of the original. Its course of transport through the population and through history takes a completely unpredictable path: books, word of mouth, blogs, podcasts, signs, texting, rumour, advertising. The digital world has put the portability of ideas on hyperdrive. Their distribution follows no set course; every idea becomes part of a storm of ideas, merging with all other ideas that have ever existed. Their final triumph can take a circuitous route that defies all expectations.



In economics, the first condition of the need for economization is scarcity. For this reason, the difference between scarce and nonscarce goods is fundamental and absolute. A good is either rivalrous in ownership and control or it is not. It either has to be reproduced following consumption or not. It either depreciates in its physical integrity or it does not. If I am wearing my shoes now, no one else can wear them at the same time. But if I hold an idea and decide to share it with the world, I can retain my ownership while permitting the creation of infinite numbers of copies. In this sense, ideas evade all the limitations of the physical world.

Another example: Let's say that I'm standing in front of a group of a thousand people. I hand an item, like watch or glass, to a person on the front row. She passes it on through the crowd. At any point in time, it would be possible for me to track precisely who has the item, who handed it to her, and then to see whom she hands it to next. It follows a traceable path. That path can be observed. But if I stand in front of the same group, and sing a song, toss out an idea, or show an image, it would be impossible to trace the path that this idea would take as it impresses itself on the minds of the people present. The travels of ideas are impossible map it.

This is the difference between ideas and scarce property. They are produced and distributed in a completely different way. None of the conditions that cause the structure of production to exist in the physical world actually apply to the world of ideas. Their functioning is radically different.

Perhaps, then, it is best to regard the structure of production as applying to the world of ideas only in a metaphorical sense? Even then, there is a question about how much such a metaphor actually explains. Good ideas as they apply to liberty can come from anywhere. Consider the repeal of alcohol prohibition in the United States. Did the idea come first from the academics, flow to the media, and become enacted by the common people working through their representatives in politics? Not so far as I understand the history. Instead, it came about because the policy was no longer enforceable in light of mass civil disobedience. The same might be said of pot legalization today.

Such bottom-up efforts are evident in the progress of the cyberpunk world that gave us distributed networks, mass availability of cryptography, and the innovation of the blockchain ledger for porting secure information. We now have the technology to commodify, bundle, and title any type of information pool, based on our own creation as an extension of our own imagination, and port it over geographically noncontiguous lines, using cryptography to customize what information we share and over a distributed network that no state can take down, in a manner that is non-forgible and nonreproducible and not

subject to any level of depreciation, ever. That's just amazing. We can do that now, and no one can take that technology away from us. The whole apparatus was released on a free forum by an anonymous programmer. How can we possibly fit this liberty-granting technology into some structure of production?



Jimmy Carter, U.S. President

And consider, too, the cluster of deregulatory efforts of the late 1970s: trucking, oil, airlines, telecommunications, and banking. Jimmy Carter, a Democrat, was president and a champion of this movement. He worked mainly with the office of Sen. Edward Kennedy, a Democrat, in enacting the legislation. This is something that no one could have anticipated. The “structure of production” of these ideas followed a nonintuitive course.

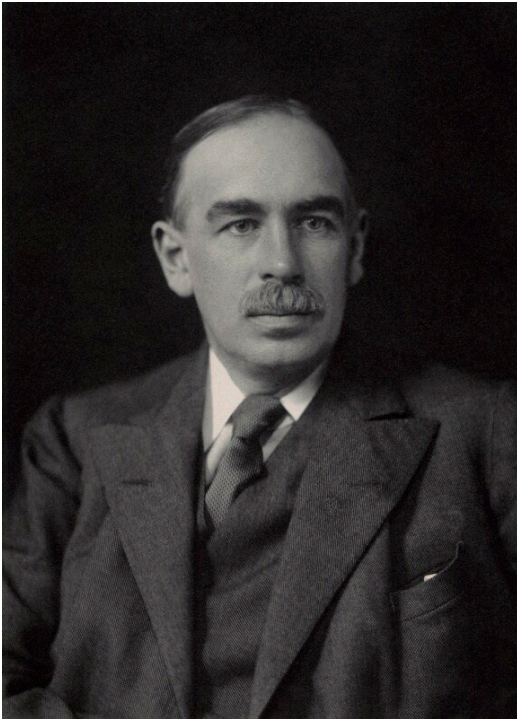
We make a profound error in imagining that we can plan intellectual change in the way we plan production of other goods and services. That ideas permeate society in an unpredictable and even chaotic way is nothing to regret. But we need to come to terms with the reality and thereby eschew the presumptions of knowledge that are inherent in trying to construct some top-down strategy for social change. It is best just to speak out, tell the truth, and build liberty in every conceivable way we can, pushing history in the direction it must go, and then

delight as the course of events defies our every expectation.

AUSTRIAN CAPITAL THEORY AND THE ROLE OF IDEAS

by David Gordon

I'd like to discuss three topics in David Hart's excellent and characteristically erudite essay. The first of these topics is the most general. Hart writes of wanting to study "how pro-liberty ideas were developed and then used to bring about political and economic change in a pro-liberty direction." He proceeds to list a large number of "historical examples of successful radical change in ideas and political/economic structures, in both a pro-liberty and anti-liberty direction."



John Maynard Keynes

I hope that I do not misinterpret Hart, but his remarks suggest that he takes ideas to be a major cause, perhaps *the* major cause, of political and social change. This is a familiar view. Everyone will remember Keynes's comment in *The General Theory*: "the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and

when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back."[\[20\]](#)

Some people go further. Leonard Peikoff claims in *The Ominous Parallels* that not only do philosophical ideas determine the course of history, but that this must be the case. "Since men cannot live or act without some kind of basic guidance, the issues of philosophy in some form necessarily affect every man, in every social group and class. Most men, however, do not consider such issues in explicit terms. They absorb their ideas ... from the atmosphere around them. . ."[\[21\]](#)

Peikoff notes that a "cultural atmosphere is not a primary. It is created, ultimately, by a handful of men: by those whose lifework it is to deal with, originate, and propagate fundamental ideas." Accordingly, the "root cause of Nazism" lies in the "esoteric writings" of the professors who laid the foundation for the events "hailed or cursed in headlines."[\[22\]](#)

I do not wish to claim that the view I attribute to Hart of the role of ideas in history is false: to the contrary, I hope that it is true. If it is true, though, it is not obviously true, and it should not be assumed as a matter of course. Those who favor the position ought to argue for its truth, and pleasant quotations from Friedrich Hayek and Lord Acton about the importance of ideas do not suffice.

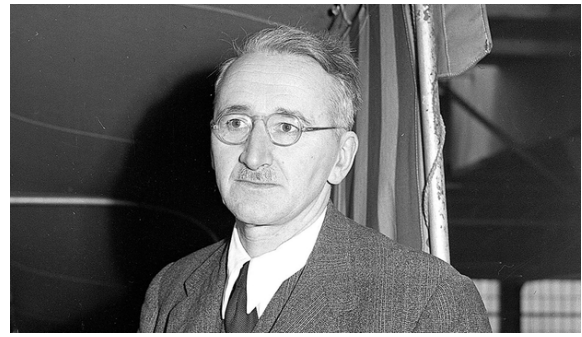
Whether or not, though, ideas are influential, the question arises: how are they created and spread? Hart appeals to "Austrian capital theory," and his remarks about this are the next topic I'd like to discuss. What interests Hart is "in particular the notion of 'the structure of production of goods' -- if we understand in this context that "goods" are 'intellectual goods,' or ideas, and not raw materials or machinery. Before we can distribute goods to consumers (first-order goods), we have to have a structure of production of goods ranging from the highest order (analogous to raw materials) to various intermediate orders (analogous to the production of machines for

factories that will produce the consumer goods, and the trucks and logistics to get the goods to their final destination), and then the shops on Main Street that will sell the lowest-order goods to consumers.”

According to the Austrian theory to which Hart appeals, consumer goods normally require land, labor, and capital to produce. For each capital good involved in the production of a consumer good, one can in turn inquire: how was *it* produced? Either land and labor sufficed to produce the capital good, or another capital good was required. In the latter case, we can repeat the inquiry. Eventually, the inquiry will end at a stage with only land and labor as inputs: no capital good is an original factor of production. Production travels forward from original land and labor to consumer goods, but the analysis of the process of production goes in the other direction, from the consumer goods back through the stages of production to the original land and labor. The stages are said to become “higher” as they recede from the consumer goods.

It should be clear that this has little if anything to do with the generation and spread of ideas. The application of the Austrian view to ideas, I take it, is that one begins with “liberal scholarship” This is analogous to the “raw material” at the “highest level” that is then passed down the various stages until it reaches the consuming public. The starting point, in sum, is a complex, nuanced, and creative idea that is simplified and made palatable to the public.

Nothing precludes such a process, but it is certainly not necessary. Why *must* one begin with a creative contribution to scholarship? Perhaps instead, in a particular case, popular ideas came first, and later scholarly work refined them. If you want to build a modern airplane, you cannot do it with bare labor and land on which to stand. You require a vast array of capital goods as well, and these must be produced in the way described by Austrian production theory. To bring an idea to the public, by contrast, you do not need to have as “raw material” a scholarly idea that you will then simplify.



Friedrich von Hayek

Confusion on this point may stem from the fact that Hayek, a leading contributor to Austrian capital theory, wrote also a famous paper, “The Intellectuals and Socialism,” that deals with the transmission of ideas. In this paper, which Hart discusses, Hayek has a great deal to say about the way in which intellectuals, whom he calls the “secondhand dealers in ideas,” take over the contributions of scholarship and offer them to the reading public. Nowhere, though, does Hayek claim in “The Intellectuals and Socialism” that ideas must be produced in this fashion. Certainly a scholar does not need a “secondhand dealer in ideas” in order to reach a wide audience. Hayek, after all, wrote *The Road to Serfdom* for the educated public. Neither does he make any connection in his article between what he says about ideas and the Austrian theory of production.

The final topic in Hart’s essay I wish to discuss is his account of Murray Rothbard’s ideas on strategy. Hart says, “For the libertarian movement he advises creation of a Leninist-style ‘cadre’ of committed and knowledgeable individuals who understand both the theory of liberty as well as how it might be implemented in the political world.” Hart goes on to say “Rothbard’s strategic theory might be pursued at greater length in a future post in this discussion, especially his [James] Millian-Leninism and its appropriateness for a movement based upon individual liberty, free markets, and individual responsibility.”

Hart’s remarks convey, unintentionally I am sure, a misleading impression. The unwary reader might surmise that Rothbard was proposing a libertarian version of the Bolshevik party, with its fanaticism and iron discipline. The impression would be enhanced by Hart’s incorrect

suggestion that Rothbard's thought on strategy began in the 1970s, "when he hoped to turn the fledgling Libertarian Party into one modeled on his theory of 'cadres' and before he split acrimoniously with [Charles] Koch and the Cato Institute and gave up the idea of shaping the LP in his Millian-Leninist image."

Rothbard's began thinking about strategy substantially before the 1970s, and he did not formulate his ideas as a way to influence the Libertarian Party, which did not then exist. When he first spoke of cadres, he did not have in mind a political party, much less a political party in the style of the ruling party in Soviet Russia. In a Memorandum of July 1961, "What Is To be Done?" written for the Volker Fund, Rothbard says: "We are not interested in seizing power and governing the State, and we therefore proclaim, not only adhere to, such values as truth, individual happiness, etc., which the Leninists subordinate to their party's victory."^[23]

What, though, of that dread word "cadre"? Rothbard intended nothing sinister by it. Rather, he had in mind people who adhered to a consistent set of libertarian principles. Like the Leninists, they were interested in more than day-to-day-"opportunism." That is to say, they did not find satisfactory as a goal the mere modification of the existing arrangements in way slightly more favorable to the free market. Unlike "sectarians," Rothbard does not insist that one state one's "full ideological position at all times," but the hard core, or cadre, "must always aim toward the advancement of libertarian-individualist thought ... among the people and to spread its policies in the political arena."^[24]

In a passage from "The Intellectuals and Socialism" that Hart quotes, Hayek makes the same point: "We need intellectual leaders who are willing to work for an ideal, however small may be the prospects of its early realization. They must be men who are willing to stick to principles and to fight for their full realization, however remote." It is puzzling, for that reason, that Hart entitles the section of his essay that discusses Rothbard, "Hayek vs. Rothbard."

Endnotes

^[20.] John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (New York, 1936), p. 383.

^[21.] Leonard Peikoff, *The Ominous Parallels* (New York, 1982), p. 24

^[22.] *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

^[23.] David Gordon, ed., *Strictly Confidential: The Private Volker Fund Memos of Murray N. Rothbard* (Auburn, 2011), p.8. The title of Rothbard's memo of course echoes Lenin's famous pamphlet.

^[24.] *Ibid.*, p. 9

THE IMPORTANCE OF PEACEFUL MASS MOVEMENTS

by Jim Powell

In his lead essay David Hart has done a lot fruitful brainstorming and compiled a comprehensive list of important pro-liberty movements. His rich mother lode of material might help resolve an enduring puzzle: There are far more libertarians now than a half-century ago, far more libertarian books published, far more libertarian think tanks developing and promoting libertarian ideas, and so on -- yet government is bigger and more powerful than ever. What, if anything, can be done about it?

My suggestion is that we reexamine peaceful mass movements because some of the greatest advances for liberty have been achieved with that strategy. Few if any libertarians seem to have had firsthand experience with a peaceful mass movement in the United States -- after all, the last one ended about a half-century ago. Among the most successful peaceful mass movements for liberty were the movement to abolish the British slave trade and British slavery in the Western Hemisphere (1838), the movement to achieve Catholic emancipation from civil disabilities (1829), the movement to abolish the Corn Laws and promote free trade (1846), the movement to achieve equal rights for women, including the right to

vote (1918), and the movement to abolish compulsory racial segregation (1964).



A peaceful mass movement aims to get a policy changed, and the movement continues, perhaps for many years, until the policy is changed or the movement runs out of steam. A peaceful mass movement involves mobilizing large numbers of people for rallies, protests, marches, demonstrations, concerts and other public events. Motivating large numbers of people to show up for an event is the most dramatic way to prove that there's a lot of discontent about something the government is doing or not doing. Discontent, in turn, can put pressure on politicians to do the right thing. Mobilizing large numbers of people creates newsworthy events that generate photographs and videos tens of millions if not hundreds of millions of people can see, leading to more publicity. To be effective, a peaceful mass movement must have a specific, simple agenda -- which the recent anti-Wall Street "Occupy" sit-ins notably lacked.

Recall how, in 1955, the American civil rights movement began as protests against compulsory racial segregation and persisted for nine years until compulsory racial segregation ended. Martin Luther King Jr., as the movement's most famous leader, sometimes required considerable courage since he was jailed 14 times, the target of countless death threats, stoned, and stabbed; his home was blasted by a shotgun and bombed, and a motel room where he stayed was bombed, too, before he was assassinated.

In 1823 Irish lawyers Daniel O'Connell and Richard Lawler Sheil formed the Catholic Association to challenge English laws that denied Irish people the liberty

to own land, attend school, learn a trade, bear arms, hold public office, travel abroad, or practice their religion without interference. This was the beginning of a peaceful mass movement aimed to achieve Catholic emancipation. O'Connell was on the road constantly, speaking in every city and hamlet. He generated so much popular pressure for reform that back in London, on April 10, 1829, Parliament passed the emancipation bill to reduce or remove many restrictions on Catholics.

In 1787 Cambridge University student Thomas Clarkson began to travel around England, helping to form antislavery groups and giving speeches at public meetings run like religious revivals. In this peaceful mass movement, Clarkson shocked audiences by holding up branding irons, neck collars, leg shackles, handcuffs, thumbscrews, and other gruesome devices for enforcing slavery. He displayed diagrams showing how slave ships chained human beings into tiny spaces, awash with excrement. Clarkson arranged for former slaves like Olaudah Equiano to testify about their experience. Clarkson bombarded Parliament with about 500 antislave-trade petitions signed by more than 400,000 people. Buoyed by this proof of public support, member of Parliament William Wilberforce introduced antislave-trade bills year after year. By 1807 Parliament voted to abolish the British slave trade. Clarkson and Wilberforce subsequently campaigned to abolish British slavery. Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act on August 29, 1833.

In 1839 Richard Cobden and John Bright began a peaceful mass movement to abolish grain import taxes that made food more expensive for millions of hungry people. "It appears to me," Cobden wrote, "that a moral and even a religious spirit may be infused into that topic [free trade], and if agitated in the same manner that the question of slavery has been, it will be irresistible." Cobden and Bright were on the road almost nonstop. Cobden recalled, "We spoke to about two thousand persons in the parish church [Aberdeen], travelled thirty-five miles, held a meeting at Montrose, and then thirty-five miles to Dundee, for a meeting the same evening. Tomorrow we go to Cupar Fife, next day,

Leith, the day following, Jedburgh.” Spurred by the failure of the Irish potato crop and the deadly famine there, Parliament repealed the grain import taxes in 1846.



Elizabeth Cady Stanton

In 1848 Elizabeth Cady Stanton launched a peaceful mass movement to achieve equal rights for women. She was mainly concerned about gaining equal property rights -- the right to sign contracts, to hold property, to inherit property and so on. She viewed the right to vote as a policy needed for securing equal property rights. She formed the Woman Suffrage Association of America and served as president of the National Woman Suffrage Association. She crisscrossed the country, giving speeches, as she recalled, “in log cabins, in depots, unfinished school houses, churches, hotels, barns, and in the open air.” Stanton and her principal partner Susan B. Anthony kept the movement going for decades. The right of women to vote in America was secured 70 years after the movement had begun.

Would it really be possible to mobilize large numbers of people for liberty and justice today? Well, it's hard to draw a crowd, since that involves motivating people to leave the comfort of their homes, to go someplace that might be inconvenient, perhaps to incur some travel costs, and most important, to make time for the event in a busy schedule.

I have some specific ideas on how this might be done, which I will pursue in more detail in a future post.

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- "Passionate Oratory: A Biography of Daniel O'Connell" <<http://www.libertarianism.org/publications/essays/passionate-oratory-biography-daniel-oconnell>>
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THE MOST REASONABLE PEOPLE IN THE ROOM

by Jason Kuznicki

I find nothing more entertaining than getting together with four or five other libertarians, opening a bottle of bourbon, and chatting about praxeology until the wee hours of the morning.

By most Americans' standards, that makes me ... a weirdo.

In my defense I am a happy weirdo. I love being a professional libertarian. Every day I look forward to going to work, and I recognize how rare a treat unalienated labor is in the grand scheme of things.

If you're reading this, you're probably something of a weirdo too. Not that there's anything wrong with that. And I'm glad you're with me, because we liberty people need to stick together.

Our little tribe could even be dead right about everything. I wouldn't be doing what I do if I didn't think we had found something both true and important. When it seems that you have found something like that, it is enormously fun just to sit around and discuss it.

But if we really are right, then we are also called upon to *sell* our unconventional viewpoint. And I've got to confess that the late-night libertarian bull sessions begin to look like a guilty pleasure. To use the metaphor of economic production offered in the lead essay, high-level discussions are not necessarily primary production goods. They may be consumption goods, at least insofar as they don't lead, directly or indirectly, to any form of changed public policy.



Against Utopia

What *might* change public policy? I can name several things. First, though, a couple of warnings.

The vast majority of Americans simply aren't interested in our ideology. They do not want to learn about it. They do not want to hear about it. They may even find something vaguely disreputable about the practice of building an ideology in the first place, whether it be ours, or the socialists', or anyone else's. Americans aren't interested in *ideology*, period.

That all by itself may be a big part of why we haven't won.

In many cases Americans' disdain for ideology works out for the good. We have largely been shielded from fascism and communism, and we have even escaped many of the worst aspects of gradualist socialism. Even the socialists' utopianism -- which Hayek clearly envied -- did not help socialism as much as Hayek feared it would. Being anti-ideological would appear to be a healthy part of our nation's political immune system.

My first caution, then, is that utopian visions are vastly overrated. The unappreciated truth about writing in the utopian vein is that utopias only rarely inspire on their first appearance. Most of them fail immediately, above all among Americans. There is much more in the way of bad and ugly about the genre, I think, than there is of beautiful and stirring. And even successful works of utopian literature usually age badly: Everyone remembers Aldous Huxley's dystopian masterpiece, which is *Brave New World*. Everyone forgets *Island*, his attempt at a utopia.

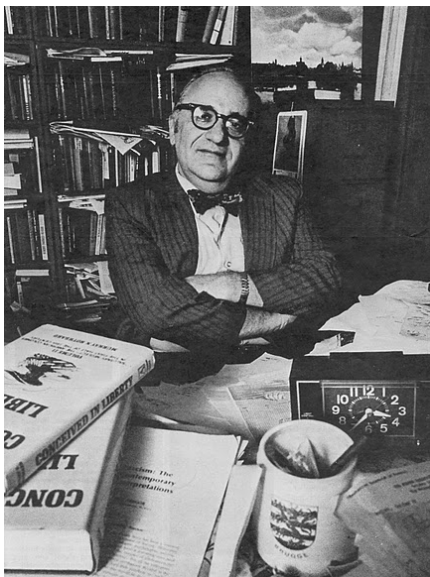
This suggests that trying to write the next *Atlas Shrugged* may not be the best strategy for us, even granting that the first *Atlas Shrugged* was a phenomenal success. (Which it was!) As an editor, I have seen dozens of books billing themselves as the next *Atlas Shrugged*, and none of them have stirred me in the slightest. Their authors might have done better to write a simple letter to the editor of a newspaper, or an op-ed about a local issue that mattered. They would certainly have wasted less time, and they might even have made a difference.

I do wish it were easy to be inspiring in the sort of comprehensive, broad-brush way that Ayn Rand so clearly mastered. But it's *not* easy. It's damnably hard, and as a result, our efforts are almost certainly better spent elsewhere.

Rationalism Is Killing Us

My second warning concerns rationalism in ideology. Among those who as a matter of habit think in abstractions, there is a dangerous tendency to ignore -- or even to flout -- that which passes for common sense. And so we are led down paths that do us no good as a movement.

Murray Rothbard frankly shot himself in the foot when suggested that in his ideal society a parent would have no positive legal obligation to feed her child, and that no one would have any legal right to interfere if she did.[\[34\]](#)



Murray N. Rothbard

Rothbard need not have made the move he did. He might simply have said, as almost all other libertarian rights theorists do, that rights theory is a set of generalizations that begins with -- and that thus only applies to -- adults. We cannot expect it to give reasonable answers when it is applied, unchanged, to infants. If we want to make it work for infants, we first must consider how infants differ from adults.

There would be nothing inconsistent at all about such a position. But the danger I describe here is one of a foolish consistency, and I do think Rothbard fell for it. It's also exactly what happens when theory is pursued to the exclusion of empirical fact.

At times like these, a peculiar mental process begins to work in the minds of most readers. It was first brought to my attention years ago in an op-ed by William F. Buckley, one that I have unfortunately been unable to locate. I recall that Buckley was uncharacteristically kind to libertarians, at least for a bit. Then he narrated several of the Libertarian Party's then-current foibles, and he commented to the following effect: In every reasonable person there exists a little mental sorter, one that constantly asks whether one is not listening to the words of a madman. Whenever the sorter says yes, the reasonable person stops listening altogether.

It does not matter that the little mental sorter sometimes registers false positives. Life is short, and there are many clearly reasonable people to listen to. A few false positives is a small price to pay for weeding out all the nutcases in the world. Against this sorter, it does not avail that Rothbard believed that a libertarian society would see *much less* child neglect than we do today. It does not matter that he was exploring an odd lacuna in his theory, one he thought would basically never find its way into practice. The mental sorter has done its work: Rothbard is a nut. He shall be cast into the outer darkness.

So What Now?

That, my friends, is what we are up against, and I see only one way forward: We must become the most reasonable people in the room. At any gathering we attend, in any venue where we appear, it's up to us to play the straight man. If the status quo really is as crazy as we think, then we have no need to outdo it. Being reasonable attracts reasonable people. Being zany attracts attention, which is a different thing, and it only works until Buckley's mental sorter kicks in.

Now, this does *not* mean that we must surrender our principles so as to win over the unprincipled. Far from it. What it means is that we must whenever possible put

empirical foundations under the things we have come to believe through abstraction. We must give people with no patience for ideology a reason to settle on libertarian policies anyway. As Ayn Rand wrote, "Americans are anti-intellectual (with good grounds, in view of current specimens), yet they have a profound respect for knowledge and education." That's where we need to be strong.

But doing so requires *data*. It also requires hard work. It may even require, on further examination, that we alter some of our beliefs -- but *only* if that's where the empirical investigation (and not the lure of political gain) ultimately leads us. We claim that we have courage in our convictions, and that considerations of principle have given us good reason to believe as we do. Very well, let us courageously put our beliefs to the test. If we are right, it is glorious. If we are wrong, we will have learned something. Either one should be counted a win.

Many individuals have been exemplary in this respect. If Milton Friedman doesn't immediately spring to mind, he should. But also Donald J. Boudreaux, Radley Balko, Timothy Sandefur, Jacob Sullum, Greg Lukianoff, Conor Friedersdorf, Clint Bolick, and more. These are the people who do the hard and not always fun work of turning abstract convictions into a measurable difference in the world. They don't agree on everything, and I don't expect them to. What they share is that they are convincing. As a direct result, they change American minds and prompt better public policies. I hope to see many more like them in the future.

Endnotes

[34.] See Rothbard's *The Ethics of Liberty* (Auburn, Ala., Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2002), "14. Children and Rights," p. 100.

ON CRISIS, REVOLUTION, AND LIBERTY

by Peter C. Mentzel

David Hart has given us an overview of a theory of how classical liberal/libertarian ideas are produced and spread, a suggestion for an intellectual-history project on the subject, and an intriguing taxonomy of different kinds of libertarian approaches to transformation, based on various historical models. As a fellow historian, I was particularly interested in this last aspect of Dr. Hart's fine essay, and in the short space I have here I want to try to tease out a few points from his remarks that I hope will have some relevance to our current conversation. In particular, I would like to suggest that an atmosphere of crisis seems to play an important role in many (if not most) of the historical examples he provides at the end of his essay. It seems to me that intellectual movements, even those which might seem marginal, or even rather loony, in "normal" times can suddenly emerge as the "obvious" answers to the problems facing a society during times of crisis. In the brief remarks that follow I want to focus on the histories of three revolutions in eastern and central Europe: a revolution that achieved some important successes but ultimately failed to secure political power for the forces of liberalism (the revolutions of 1848); an anti-liberal revolution that succeeded (the October Revolution in Russia); and finally a successful revolution in 1989 that had swept away the communist governments in the region by 1991.



To start with the earliest of these examples, the 1848 revolutions have usually been considered failures. To paraphrase G.M. Trevelyan's famous quip, 1848 was the "turning point that failed to turn." While it is certainly true that the liberals were ultimately defeated by their enemies, they achieved everywhere, but especially in east central Europe, some important and lasting victories. Probably the most important of these, which Dr. Hart mentions in his essay, was the elimination of serfdom in the Austrian Empire in 1848 (actually the culmination of a process begun by Emperor Joseph II in 1781).^[25] What were the causes for these successes, and why could the liberals not capitalize on these victories?

Liberal ideas had been circulating in central Europe for at least a couple of decades before 1848, and their promoters had a chance to advance them further due to the exogenous crises created by a string of crop failures all over Europe in the years before 1848. These not only led to rural unrest and to financial difficulties in most European countries but also contributed to the increasing pauperization of the newly emerging industrial working class.^[26] The growing social turmoil created the conditions for liberal intellectuals and their allies in most of the European states to try to seize power and establish liberal governments.

The ultimate failure of the east central European liberals was due largely to the fact that they allowed themselves to get sidetracked by another intellectual agenda that ultimately proved to be more powerful: nationalism. Rather than focus on socioeconomic and political liberalization, the members of the revolutionary German government meeting at Frankfurt am Main in the so-called *Vorparlament*, instead focused increasingly on the establishment of a German constitutional monarchy, and in the process dissipated their energies in endless and ultimately futile discussions about the nature and extent of their envisioned German state

A very important example of a successful, though nonliberal, revolution that Dr. Hart mentions is the October (or November) Revolution of 1917.^[27] Does this revolution, paradoxically, have something to say to classical liberals and libertarians? Perhaps, but in any case,

this revolution, even more than 1848, owed much of its success to exogenous circumstances and an atmosphere of crisis.

It is important to remember that Russia in the fall of 1917 was already experiencing a revolution. The monarchy had been overthrown in the February (or March) Revolution and the country was being ruled by a shaky provisional government. In this context the Bolsheviks had two important advantages. First, they had an ideology that provided clear overall goals (even if they were vague on the specifics). Part of this ideology concerned the architecture not only of the party itself, but also of the society of the future. Lenin's main contribution (outlined in his 1902 tract *What Is to Be Done?*) was his idea of the party not as some sort of proletarian mass-movement, but as a "vanguard" made up of a select, dedicated, group of professional revolutionaries who had mastered the laws of History and could thus steer society.^[28]

The second advantage the Bolsheviks had was a politically savvy ability to capitalize on the social and economic catastrophe that was engulfing wartime Russian society. By the fall of 1917 the country's social and economic fabric was so obviously fraying that the Bolsheviks, in Lenin's terms, simply "picked up power" that they found "lying in the street."^[29] The October Revolution was really a coup d'état carried out by Lenin's small vanguard party against the thoroughly demoralized and weakened Provisional Government.

The Bolshevik revolution was a spectacular success, and the system they established ended up dominating much of Europe, indeed the rest of the globe, by the end of the 20th century. The overthrow of the Soviet empire in the revolutions of 1989-1991 must certainly count as one of the greatest victories for the cause of liberty in history. Where does it fit into the categories provided by Dr. Hart and into the narrative I have been sketching in this essay?

Once again, the success of the revolutionaries involved both the power of ideas and the impact of exogenous crisis. Liberal ideas of various kinds had never been completely extinguished in the lands of "Really Existing Socialism," especially in the countries of east central

Europe. There were always intellectuals, both in and outside the Party, who were familiar with, and attracted to, various aspects of liberalism. Moreover, the people of those countries had front-row seats to the economic development of the (relatively) liberal polities of western Europe, no matter how vigorously their communist rulers tried to disguise or disparage those achievements.

[SOCIALISM]

The opportunity for these liberal ideas to find some sort of purchase grew during the late 1980s because of a growing crisis of confidence in the communist parties of the Soviet Union and its satellites. This was in part the result of economic challenges posed by changes in the world economy, but it can also be thought of as a manifestation of the intellectual exhaustion of Really Existing Socialism. This situation made possible the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev to the post of first secretary of the CPSU in 1985.^[30] While Gorbachev was no liberal, he was one of a long line of communist leaders who sought to strengthen the communist system by piecemeal introduction of selective liberal reforms, along with a new approach to relations with the satellite countries.

As we all know, these reforms (soon copied with varying degrees of enthusiasm by the communist countries of east central Europe) if anything only made the crisis worse by creating economic and social chaos. They also provided the opportunity for the thus-far thoroughly marginalized and nearly invisible liberals to come out into the open and demand deeper and more extensive reforms. Interestingly, as in 1848, these liberal voices were frequently joined by, or even influenced by nationalist sentiments and demands.^[31]

In any case, faced with increasing economic and social disruptions, the communist parties, especially those in east central Europe, found themselves by 1989 in an untenable situation. Unable to count any longer on the

military or even the moral support of their comrades in Moscow, the rulers of the different parties were pushed aside by more opportunistic (not necessarily liberal) comrades who were willing to work with the newly empowered liberal dissidents and others demanding constitutional democracy and free-market reforms. This process continued, with many variations of course, until the Soviet Union officially dissolved itself in December 1991.

In all three of these cases a crisis situation created an opportunity for a previously marginalized intellectual movement to make a bid for power. But where exactly this leaves us I am not sure. While “Rothbardian Leninism” might seem to be an attractive strategy, the sort of ruthless discipline and party purity it calls for are hardly compatible with the broader liberal project. On the other hand, the liberal revolutionaries of 1848, though a very mixed bunch with different intellectual agendas, were initially able to win some important victories, only to be blindsided by the power of nationalism. The revolutionaries of 1989, while also espousing a wide variety of views and while also being influenced in varying degrees by nationalism, were apparently able to muster some bare minimum of discipline so that they were able to take power during the crisis years of 1989-1991.^[32] I wonder where their strategy fits within Dr. Hart’s taxonomy of libertarian resistance and what if anything it has to teach us?

Endnotes

^[25.] Mike Rapport, *1848: Year of Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), pp. 270-71; Robert Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire, 1526-1918* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 198-99.

^[26.] Rapport, p. 36.

^[27.] The revolution occurred in October 1917 according to the old Julian calendar, corresponding to November in the Gregorian calendar.

^[28.] Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), p. 35.

[29.] M.K.Dziewanowski, *A History of Soviet Russia and its Aftermath* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Simon and Schuster, 1997), p. 87.

[30.] Archie Brown carefully notes that the “crisis” was “perceived only by a minority of people within the political elite -- those acutely conscious of the long-term lag between the rate of Soviet economic growth and of the technological lag between the Soviet Union and the West ... but this was not crisis in the sense that there was significant public unrest.” p. 486.

[31.] Joseph Rothschild and Nancy M. Wingfield, *Return to Diversity: A Political History of East Central Europe since World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 175; Peter C. Mentzel, “Nationalism, Civil Society, and the Revolution of 1989,” *Nations and Nationalism*, vol.18, part 4, October 2012, pp. 624-42.

[32.] Mike Rapport is one of many writers to note the similarities between the revolutions of 1989 and 1848. An important difference is that many of the leaders of the 1989 revolutions “wanted their revolution to be an ‘anti-revolution’” in the sense that “opposition to communism was not about a violent seizure of power, but rather involved elevating the cultural opposition in civil society to greater importance than the repressive state.” p. 414.

IDEAS AND STRATEGIES

by Stephen Davies

David Hart’s wide-ranging survey offers much food for thought, not least in the exhaustive survey of both strategies to expand liberty and episodes in history that successfully did so. Several immediate thoughts come to mind, in particular that of how far there was a connection between the two. How many of the movements or events he identifies were clearly motivated by ideas of liberty that had been articulated beforehand and were held by, and inspirational for, the participants and leaders? In some cases, such as antislavery, the connection is clear; in other such. as medieval peasant movements, less so. In this piece I will look at one set of thoughts and questions that

arise from the essay, leaving another set (that of the role of ideological entrepreneurship and the use of the analogy drawn from Austrian economics) till later.



Clearly we need to make a distinction between formulating, developing, and articulating ideas on the one hand and having them influence and shape political and social change on the other. The two can be connected but the link is not always straightforward. There is also the major question of the direction of the causal arrow. Was Hayek correct in seeing ideas as the driving force, the motivating or shaping factor that led to social change and gave it a specific direction? Or is it rather, as materialist explanations would have it, that it is changes in material conditions of life that lead to new ideas or reformulations of old ones and which lead to certain kinds of outcome. Perhaps, as many argue, the real answer is a combination of the two in which causation works in both directions and with many feedback loops, some positive, others negative.

David Hart has an extended analysis of what he describes as the production process of ideas. Considering this further can clarify what is involved in the activity of sustaining and developing a comprehensive set of ideas, arguments, and analyses, an ideology if you will. One obvious point is that this kind of intellectual production cannot be done by isolated savants, no matter how brilliant or insightful they may be. Isolated scholars will tend to produce work that is not fully thought out and often eccentric or obscure. Moreover it will generally not achieve purchase upon public discourse or

vocabulary. What is needed is a community of scholars and producers of ideas and analysis, of people who conduct a conversation among themselves. This is the real importance of Nock's idea of organizing and collecting the "Remnant" together, of the work of Pierre Goodrich in creating Liberty Fund, and of Hayek in creating the Mont Pelerin Society. One of the most important aspects of this is the development of rules, norms, and institutions that govern the conversation, and this is often difficult as it has to mean that certain people or modes of argument are excluded.

However the creation and sustaining of this conversation and the community that creates it is only a necessary condition for the successful development of a sound and effective set of ideas. The organized intellectual community (classical-liberal intellectuals in this case) cannot and must not remain a self-conscious remnant. It is vital that they participate in a conversation with the wider academic community as well as among themselves. Moreover, as Hayek argued, they need to communicate with and influence the disseminators of ideas into wider public discourse, the "second-hand dealers in ideas" that he saw as the crucial social group to influence.

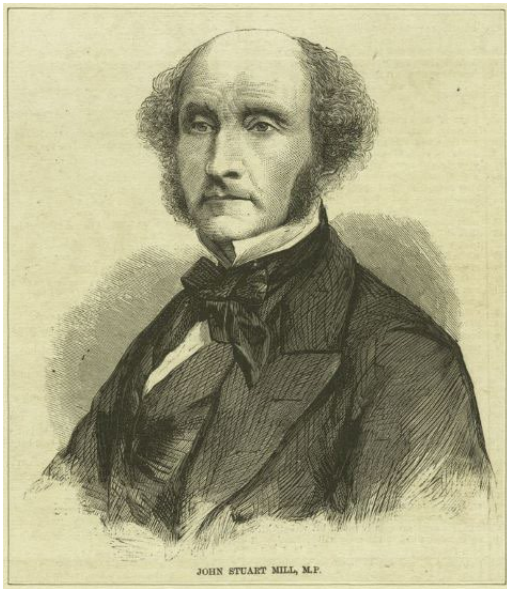
Active and effective participation in the general scholarly conversation is hugely important for a number of reasons. The most obvious is that if the aim is for the ideas to have influence, this will not happen if they are ignored. Even hostile responses are better than none. In addition, it is precisely that criticism and challenge that ultimately strengthens the ideology and makes it more robust. Here the crucial work was done by think tanks such as the Institute of Economic Affairs in London and organizations like the Institute for Humane Studies in America, which supported new and established intellectuals and helped them to do good work and get their arguments and ideas taken seriously, even if they were often sharply criticized. The point is not only to refine one's own ideas but to engage in debate with the dominant orthodoxy, both to challenge it and, more importantly, to ensure that the argument is intellectually robust.

This point bears emphasizing because so many seem to ignore it, not least among classical liberals. The great danger for any intellectual project that aims not only to understand the world but also to change it is that it will fall into what sociologists call "the cultic milieu." This was a concept first formulated by the British sociologist Colin Campbell in 1972.^[33] He and other sociologists observed that people who held one view that deviated from the orthodoxy tended to hold other unorthodox views on matters completely unrelated to their main interest. Thus when socialism was very much an unorthodox view, its adherents were disproportionately likely to also be vegetarians and interested in the occult and cranky or discredited views of history. Today people who have fascist politics are also disproportionately likely to believe that the earth was contacted by aliens or that enormously advanced technologies exist but have been suppressed.

The reason for this, Campbell argued, was the existence of an oppositional subculture where people opposed to different aspects of the conventional way of thinking mingled, exchanged ideas, and organized. The result was that their marginality was intensified. In addition, this phenomenon meant that people who had an initially reasoned dissent from some part of conventional wisdom would come to hold views that were genuinely bizarre or cranky. The best example of this, and the big warning sign that an ideology (or rather its followers) have become part of the cultic milieu, is when many of them come to believe in conspiracy theories or other paranoid accounts of the world. The more self-contained and self-referential an intellectual community becomes, the more likely it is that this will happen, and this is an even greater danger than irrelevance when it comes to having an influence on social development.

The classical liberals who came together after World War II (although the process had begun before the war, with the Colloque Lippman in Paris) managed to avoid this trap for the most part, although it remains a peril. However, as David Hart's essay points out, the original production of ideas and their refining (scholarly activity) is only the first stage. The ideas then have to be

disseminated. This takes three forms. The first is the one alluded to earlier, in which ideas developed by original thinkers are then spread and broadcast by “second-hand dealers in ideas” such as writers, journalists, teachers; in other words by the “chattering classes.” This is the one that classical liberals have followed with some success since Hayek’s original formulation of the idea in the 1940s. It was also historically a matter of great importance. In the history of the spread of liberal ideas in 19th-century Europe and the wider world, the key figures were people like Harriet Martineau or Sydney Smith, who took the ideas of scholars such as Smith and Ricardo and made them widely known and understood. Sometimes original thinkers play both roles -- J. S. Mill was an example of this on the liberal side, while Ruskin and Carlyle can be cited on the opposition -- but this is unusual.



John Stuart Mill

However, there are other aspects of this part of the “production process” in which classical liberals have been arguably less successful since 1945 than their predecessors in the 18th and 19th centuries. The second way that ideas are spread is through organized and systematic propaganda aimed at the mass of the population. Here it is fair to say that all political ideologies have found it harder to effectively spread their views than was the case a hundred years ago. This may seem strange, given that the advent of the mass circulation press in the

early 20th century, followed by radio and then television, has made it possible to reach a mass audience in a way that was inconceivable before 1900. However, the nature of these media works against oppositional or critical ideologies. Their very high capital costs (exacerbated by regulation and government controls) mean that access to them is controlled by the dominant social and political groups, which make it difficult for rival perspectives to find expression. (This is often done in an unthinking and unpremeditated way, but that does not affect the reality.) Moreover, the nature of these media, above all television, is that it is hard to put over complex or nuanced arguments, as compared to the media that use print or only the spoken word, and this hampers ideas that are not commonplace. Recently even orthodox or mainstream ways of looking at the world have found it difficult to propagandize effectively because the nature of contemporary mass media is to overwhelm messages with random reporting of trivia (in communications-speak, the signal is drowned out by noise) and to focus on the immediate present at the expense of any kind of longer term perspective. Fortunately we seem to be having a new communications revolution that is undoing this, but classical liberals are only starting to find ways of employing propaganda effectively again.

The third way that ideas developed by scholars are disseminated and absorbed is perhaps the most important. This is through the medium of popular culture and art. This can have a truly profound and transformative effect because of the way it shapes what French historians call the “mentalite collectifs,” the general (often inarticulate) way of understanding and making sense of the world that is shared by the great mass of the population in a given time and place and the commonly understood symbols and allusions that come from this. In the 19th century, liberal ideas came to permeate much popular culture through literature (as for example in the works of Stendahl, Schiller, Manzoni, Victor Hugo, Trollope, and Thackeray), fine art and architecture (most notably in the works of the “Academical School”), and music (notably the work of people such as Beethoven and Verdi). This was not uncontested of course; we can point to figures such as

Charles Dickens, Thomas Carlyle, or Richard Wagner on the other side, but at that time the liberal way of thinking was widespread and influential.

There were certain genres that were particularly important in this regard. One was popular political economy as found in didactic stories, such as those of Martineau. Another was the popular genre of exemplary biography and the related one of self-help literature (before it was taken over by “New Thought” in the 1890s). Perhaps the most important was popular historiography and historical fiction, both of which were hugely popular. There is far less of this kind of phenomenon today. The major exception, which David Hart alludes to, is the case of Ayn Rand, but her prominence is partly due to her being an exception -- if there were more popular authors like her she would not be such a predominant figure. In addition there is a strong element of self-aware libertarianism in much science fiction, but again this is exceptional.

So although the project begun by Hayek and others after World War II has succeeded in creating and sustaining an intellectual community engaged with the wider academic world and producing a stream of ideas and analyses, the second stage of the transmission of those ideas to a wider audience has been only partially successful and is still limited in comparison to earlier periods. So if we are thinking about social change, we still need to consider how to make the spread of ideas more effective; but more importantly, how to make those ideas influential and in some sense determinative of social change in the direction of greater liberty.

Endnotes

[33.] C. Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization,” in *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5 (London: SCM Press, 1972), pp. 119-36; C. Campbell, “The Secret Religion of the Educated Classes,” *Sociological Analysis* 39 (1978), pp. 146-56.

SOME CLASSICAL LIBERAL HISTORIANS ON THE INFLUENCE AND DISSEMINATION OF IDEAS

by George H. Smith

David Hart’s essay gives us a lot to think about. His outlines alone would take many volumes to address even in a cursory manner. But David’s primary purpose was to stimulate a general discussion about the generation, dissemination, and influence of classical liberal ideas.

As my primary contribution to this forum, I wish to discuss how some leading Victorian liberals addressed the issue of how ideas influence legislation and societies in general. The nineteenth century was the great age of liberal intellectual histories, as we see in the ambitious books by H.T. Buckle, *History of Civilization in England* (1857-61), [35] W.E.H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of Rationalism in Europe* (1865) and *History of European Morals* (1869), [36] Sir Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876), [37] J.M. Robertson, *A History of Freethought, Ancient and Modern* (1906) and *A History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century* (1899), [38] and A.V. Dicey, *Lectures on the Relation Between Law and Public Opinion in England During the Nineteenth Century* (1905). [39] With the possible exception of Robertson, [40] all of these historians qualify as classical liberals. And all of them, without exception, were keenly interested in the social and political conditions that made the progress of knowledge possible.



William Edward Lecky

Although I will summarize what these liberal historians had to say about the relationship between ideas and social/political change, I cannot possibly do this in a single, brief comment, so my treatment will require additional essays. I shall begin with the views of Leslie Stephen (1832-1904). Before proceeding, however, I should call attention to the expression “spirit of the age” and similar formulations that were commonly used by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historians.^[41] As Stephen made clear, this was simply another label for what we now call “public opinion.”

How is it that a tacit intellectual co-operation is established between minds far apart in the scale of culture and natural acuteness? How is it that the thought of the intellectual leaders is obscurely reflected by so many darkened mirrors, even when we are unable to point to any direct and overt means of transmission? How far may we believe in the apparent unity of that shifting chaos of speculations of more or less independent thinkers, which forms what we vaguely describe as public opinion, or the spirit of the age.^[42]

In addition to linking the expressions “public opinion” and “the spirit of the age,” Stephen noted how vague these labels tend to be. Moreover, his interest in the problem of how similar ideas may arise in the same

society, even though the people with those ideas were not directly influenced by one another, displays a level of sophistication that was characteristic of liberal historians. Some of these Victorian liberals anticipated F.A. Hayek’s observations about the role of intellectuals in society, and some even ventured into realms that Hayek never discussed. Yet for the most part modern libertarians, including libertarian scholars, are unaware of their contributions.

Stephen began his discussion of ideas and their influence by citing the example of [David Hume](#). Although friend and foe alike have acknowledged Hume’s tremendous influence, his books did not reach a popular audience. Even “amongst the educated minority he had but few readers; and amongst the few readers still fewer who could appreciate his thoughts....Men of the highest reputation failed to understand his importance.”^[43] Stephen continued:

If Hume impressed men of mark so slightly, we are tempted to doubt whether he can have affected the main current of thought. Yet, as we study the remarkable change in the whole tone and substance of our literature which synchronised with the appearance of Hume’s writings, it is difficult to resist the impression that there is some causal relation. A cold blast of scepticism seems to have chilled the very marrow of speculative activity.^[44]

Stephen maintained that Hume’s general influence was not due only to his own writings but also owed a great deal to the fact that he “influenced a powerful though small class”—capable intellectuals who gradually spread Hume’s ideas throughout a broader social network. (Stephen’s thinking here was very similar to Hayek’s notion of second-hand intellectuals.) Nevertheless, the remarkable and widespread transmission of Humean skepticism in later eighteenth century Britain cannot be explained adequately by referring only to those intellectuals who were directly influenced by Hume. Rather, “we must admit that thousands of inferior thinkers were dealing with the same problems which occupied Hume, and, though with far less acuteness or

logical consistency, arriving at similar solutions”^[45] This convergence of many unconnected individuals who were simultaneously concerned with the same problems and who arrived at similar solutions is a common historical phenomenon, and it requires an explanation.



David Hume

Stephen noted that most histories of philosophy “limit their attention to the ablest thinkers.” But the influence of leading philosophers on later philosophers who corrected and/or built upon their ideas was primarily logical, not social, in nature. The proverbial average person has little interest in technical philosophy, and most people make little if any effort to render their ideas clear and consistent. The transmission and influence of ideas depends on many factors other than logical reasoning. As Stephen put it:

Thought moves in a spiral curve, not in a straight line. But, when we look beyond the narrow circle of illustrious philosophers, we are impressed with the conviction that other causes are at work besides those which are obvious to the logician. Doctrines vanish without a direct assault; they change in sympathy with a change in apparently remote departments of enquiry; superstitions, apparently suppressed, break out anew in slightly modified shapes; and we discover that a phase of thought, which we had imagined to involve a new departure, is but a superficial modification of an old order of ideas.^[46]

Every historian mentioned in this essay was deeply interested in the social and political conditions that made new intellectual developments possible and acceptable

not only to the intellectual class but also among members of a society in general. And this interest led liberal historians to investigate the nature of “public opinion” and how it is typically formed.

Endnotes

^[35.] Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilization in England* (London: J. W. Parker and son, 1857-61). 2 vols.

^[36.] William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe, Revised edition* (New York: D. Appleton, 1919) (1st ed 1865). 2 vols. <[/titles/1871](#)>; *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne, Third edition, revised* (New York: D. Appleton, 1921). (1st ed. 1869) 2 vols. <[/titles/1840](#)>. The OLL also has online the following works by Lecky: *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1878, 1917). 8 Vols. <[/titles/2026](#)>; *Democracy and Liberty, edited and with an Introduction by William Murchison*, 2 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981). (1st ed. 1896) <[/titles/1856](#)>; and *Historical and Political Essays* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908). <[/titles/2071](#)>.

^[37.] Sir Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (G. P. Putnam's sons, 1876).

^[38.] J.M. Robertson, *A History of Freethought, Ancient and Modern, to the Period of the French Revolution* (London: Watts & co., 1936). 1st ed. 1906; *A History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Watts & Co., 1929). 1st ed. 1899.

^[39.] Albert Venn Dicey, *Lectures on the Relation between Law and Public Opinion in England during the Nineteenth Century, edited and with an Introduction by Richard VandeWetering* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2008). <[/titles/2119](#)> 1st ed. 1905. The OLL also has online A.V. Dicey, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution, ed. Roger E. Michener* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 1982). <[/titles/1714](#)> 1st ed. (1885).

^[40.] The historian John Mackinnon Robertson (1856-1933), a colleague and close friend of the atheist writer, lecturer, and publisher Charles Bradlaugh, published dozens of books on a wide range of subjects, including

sociology and Shakespearean criticism. He also served as a Member of Parliament from 1906 to 1918. Robertson was an able defender of international free trade, as well as a severe critic of colonialism, imperialism, and war. Although Robertson shared these views with classical liberals, he favored *domestic* intervention by government to a degree that few if any classical liberals would accept. He therefore may be described as a “new” liberal rather than as a classical liberal, though the boundary separating those camps is sometimes far from clear.

[41.] [Editor: One of the best known discussions of the idea of "the spirit of the age" was by John Stuart Mill in 1831. See, John Stuart Mill, "The Spirit of the Age" (1831) in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XXII - Newspaper Writings December 1822 - July 1831 Part I*, ed. Ann P. Robson and John M. Robson, Introduction by Ann P. Robson and John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986). /titles/256#lf0223-22_label_1091>. In our online edition of the *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* the essay “The Spirit of the Age” is split into 7 numbered parts, reflecting its original publication as seven separate articles in *The Examiner* in January-May 1831. Here we have combined them into a single page. </pages/mill-s-spirit-of-the-age>>.

[42.] Sir Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1962), I:2. First published in two volumes in 1876; 3rd ed. 1902. J.M. Robertson, a severe critic of Stephen on some issues, called his *History* “the first massive and scholarly contribution to the critical history of English freethought.” See J.M. Robertson, *A History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Watts and Co., 1929), II:406. For details on Stephen’s life and thought, see Frederic William Maitland, *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* (London: Duckworth and Co., 1906). Stephen is best known in some circles as the father of Virginia Woolf.

[43.] Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, II:1.

[44.] Ibid.

[45.] Ibid., II:2.

[46.] Ibid., II:2.

INTERESTS, IDEAS, AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

by David M. Hart

I would like to thank the commentators for their thoughtful and provocative responses to my lead essay. We wanted to have a range of institutes and groups represented in order to get a broad array of perspectives on the question of the impact of ideas on social change, and we were not disappointed. I will do my best in what follows to address their concerns and comments.



The Chicken and the Egg problem; or Which Comes First, Ideas or Interests?

A number of the commentators refer to this core problem, or what Steve Davies aptly describes as the direction taken by “the causal arrow”. My own perspective on the methodology of the history of ideas, especially the history of classical-liberal ideas, has been shaped by a combination of praxeology and class analysis. I think that people pursue their own economic, political, and other interests, sometimes peacefully through mutual cooperation and exchange, but often at the expense of others by means of organized violence through institutions such as the state, the church, and the military (“Throne”, “Altar”, and “Barracks”). Thus the importance of class analysis to identify the “who,” the “how,” and the “what” - who benefits from access to state power and privileges, how do they benefit, and

what are the consequences of this system of privilege.[\[47\]](#)

But I also believe in Mises's important insight developed in the chapter "Ideas and Interests" in *Theory and History* (1957): "In the world of reality, life, and human action there is no such thing as interests independent of ideas, preceding them temporally and logically. What a man considers his interest is the result of his ideas."[\[48\]](#) According to this view, the economic, political, and other interests which people pursue (whether ordinary people or ruling elites) depend upon the ideas they have about what their interests are.

Mises went on further to say about the relationship between ideas and interests:

If we keep this in mind, it is not sensible to declare that ideas are a product of interests. Ideas tell a man what his interests are. At a later date, looking upon his past actions, the individual may form the opinion that he has erred and that another mode of acting would have served his own interests better. But this does not mean that at the critical instant in which he acted he did not act according to his interests. He acted according to what he, at that time, considered would serve his interests best.[\[49\]](#)

Ideas, interests, and history play an important role in Mises's theory of "praxeology," which he defined as "the general theory of human action," by which individuals undertake "purposeful behavior" in order to pursue their interests and to achieve their goals or ends.[\[50\]](#) History in Mises's view was the second main branch of the science of human action after economics. He defined the relationship between the two as follows:

There are two main branches of the sciences of human action: praxeology and history. History is the collection and systematic arrangement of all the data of experience concerning human action. It deals with the concrete content of human action. It studies all human endeavors in their infinite multiplicity and variety and all

individual actions with all their accidental, special, and particular implications. It scrutinizes the ideas guiding acting men and the outcome of the actions performed. It embraces every aspect of human activities.[\[51\]](#)

Thus the importance of praxeology for understanding how individuals go about pursuing their various purposes and interests, whatever they may be.

If this Misesian insight into the fundamental basis of human action is correct, then the historian of ideas and social change needs to ask a number of questions about three important groups of people, namely ordinary people, intellectuals, and members of the ruling elite:

1. What ideas did this group hold about politics, economics, and social organization?
2. Where did they get these ideas from?
3. Why and under what circumstances have they changed their ideas, especially about their own interests?, and
4. What is the best way to persuade them to hold more pro-liberty ideas about these things?

One might also add another sub-group to each of these three main ones, namely dissidents, with the understanding that dissidents may and have historically come from all three main groups. Where do dissidents come from? Are they "born" or "made"? What impact have their dissident ideas had on societies?

An especially problematical group for the liberal reformer is the ruling elite. Very few if any members of any historical ruling elite have willingly given up their privileges in a "Road to Damascus" moment of liberal enlightenment and embarrassment at their ill-gotten gains. Even members of the "founding generation" of the American Revolution and Constitution who were libertarian on so many issues but also slave owners, could not overcome social, family, and economic pressures and emancipate their slaves on the spot. If they couldn't do it, how can we expect any other, less libertarian-minded ruling elite to do "the right thing"

and resign or conduct themselves to the nearest penitentiary in a quiet and orderly manner?

The schematic of the structure of production of ideas which I have drawn up was an attempt to answer some of these questions. It was a functional analysis based upon the application of Austrian insights into the importance of time, scarcity, investment, the division of labor, and the role of the entrepreneur - as well as our study of two historical examples: the Anti-Corn Law League in the 1840s in England,^[52] and the development of the modern classical-liberal/libertarian movement in England^[53] and the United States since the end of World War II. I hope that this might encourage some of the participants in this discussion to give us their insights into the institutions with which they are familiar, and other historical examples they have studied. In particular I hope Jim Powell will tell us more about the movement to emancipate the slaves in England and America on which he has written recently.



Cost, Scarcity, and Entrepreneurship in the Production of Ideas

Jeffrey Tucker correctly reminds us that a key component in the dissemination of ideas is the cost of their production, duplication, and transmission of those ideas. We are living through a period which has seen an extraordinary reduction in the price of these things as a result of computers and the Internet and we have witnessed the way classical liberals and libertarians have made use of these to advance their causes. However, we should not exaggerate their importance for two reasons: first, similar revolutionary changes in the cost of

production of ideas have occurred in the past, and second, these changes affect all participants.

As for the first point, similar instances of technological changes which lowered costs include the invention of moveable type printing in the 15th century which was a major factor contributing to the spread of new religious ideas known as the Reformation; the introduction of the uniform penny post in England in 1840, which lowered the cost of sending material through the mail and which was quickly adopted by the Anti-Corn Law League to disseminate its free trade literature; the new technologies of paper production and steam-powered printing presses in the 19th century which lowered the cost of printing books and newspapers for a mass market, permitting several liberal authors, including Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), to become full-time, professional popularizers of free-market ideas;^[54] and the mass production of radios in the 1920s and 1930s, which enabled charismatic politicians like Adolf Hitler and Franklin Delano Roosevelt to speak directly to millions of people in order to promote their political agendas. (It is curious that no classical-liberal individual or group took advantage of the radio to spread liberal ideas - perhaps this kind of mass medium is not suited to their spread). There are other examples, but for reasons of length I'll leave it at that.

Secondly, the lowering of the cost of production of ideas affects not only classical liberals but all groups that wish to disseminate their ideas. A brief advantage may be had by those who use new technology first, but after a while everybody takes advantage of it. As an aside, the Internet was created as a byproduct of military research undertaken by DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, and was first used by researchers funded by the military who wished to share large amounts of data across the country. An early user of the internet for civilian purposes was the pornography industry, which quickly realized its potential and made important innovations in software such as the “shopping cart,” for online purchasers. The danger is that, once again liberal ideas will get crowded out of the market place of ideas with millions or

hundreds of millions of producers trying to hawk their goods and services at the same time. The market has grown, but the relative scarcity of liberal ideas, especially in politics and popular culture, remains the same I would say. Examples of other groups that have taken advantage of the lower costs would include the well-organised campaigns which helped Barack Obama get elected, the Occupy Wall Street movement, and the network of Jihadi groups.

As Jason Kuznicki notes, the problem is not the mass production of ideas per se but the tailoring or selling “our unconventional viewpoint” to a market which is not interested in the finer points of libertarian theory or “utopian visions” - that is, a market of people more interested in solving their immediate everyday problems. Apple no doubt has all sorts of exotic gadgets built by its brilliant engineers in its research labs but it brings to market only the one or two products which their senior managers and marketers think will actually be appealing to consumers. Part of Apple’s skill is in seeing that an unconventional gadget like an iPod might become a phenomenal best-seller once consumers know more about it.

This is also the Holy Grail for the classical-liberal and libertarian movement. The arcane details of children’s rights might be a hot topic of discussion in the libertarian equivalent of our “research labs,” but it is not the hot-button issue which might appeal to ordinary voters at the next election. It is up to the entrepreneurs and marketers of free-market and classical-liberal ideas to find the political equivalent of the iPod and bring it to market. It seems that Tom Paine found a hot-button issue with his best-selling pamphlet *Common Sense* in 1776.^[55] Ayn Rand did much the same thing in 1957 with *Atlas Shrugged*,^[56] and Milton Friedman in 1980 with his TV documentary series, “Free to Choose.”^[57] John Papola and Russ Roberts struck a chord with their Hayek vs. Keynes rap video “Fear the Boom and Bust” (2010), which has just over 5 million views on Youtube.com so far.^[58]

So we know it can be done - the questions are: What will be the next hot-button issue and what medium is

the best one to use to address the issue (pamphlet, novel, TV documentary, or social-media video)? Hence the need for adventurous and innovative entrepreneurs of ideas who are willing to try anything and everything, and investors who are willing to fund such experiments.

What Next and Next?^[59]

In another post I will discuss several other issues which my colleagues have raised, in particular:

- examples of “direct action” by the people without any apparent intervention by intellectuals (raised by Jeffrey Tucker and Jim Powell)
- the importance of popular culture, especially images and songs, in mass political movements (raised by Jim Powell and Steve Davies)
- the issue of “ideology”, especially its supposed absence in the American political system (raised by Jason Kuznicki); and
- the trigger of “crises” which precipitate fundamental political, economic, and ideological change (raised by Peter Mentzel)

Endnotes

[47.] For a good introduction to classical-liberal class analysis, see Sheldon Richman, “Libertarian Class Analysis,” *The Future of Freedom Foundation*, June 1, 2006 <http://fff.org/explore-freedom/article/libertarian-class-analysis/>. For its centrality to French classical-liberal thought, see Ralph Raico, “Classical Liberal Exploitation Theory: A Comment on Professor Liggio’s Paper.” *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1977): 179–83; and David M. Hart, *Class Analysis, Slavery and the Industrialist Theory of History in French Liberal Thought, 1814–1830: The Radical Liberalism of Charles Comte and Charles Dunoyer* (unpublished PhD, King’s College Cambridge, 1994). Online at http://davidmhart.com/liberty/Papers/CCCD-PhD/CCCD_Book_2013.html.

[48.] Mises, “Ideas and Interests” in *Theory and History: An Interpretation of Social and Economic Evolution*, ed.

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[49.] Mises, *Theory and History*, /titles/1464#Mises_0844_320.

[50.] Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics, in 4 vols.*, ed. Bettina Bien Greaves (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2007). Vol. 1. /titles/1893#Mises_3843-01_123.

[51.] Mises, "Praxeology and History" in *Human Action*, vol. 1, /titles/1893#Mises_3843-01_216. See also, the opening paragraph to Rothbard's "Fundamentals of Human Action," Chap. 1 "The Concept of Action," pp. 1–2, and "Appendix A. Praxeology and Economics," pp. 72–76, in Murray N. Rothbard, *Man, Economy, and State: A Treatise on Economic Principles, with Power and Market: Government and the Economy. Second edition. Scholar's Edition* (Auburn, Alabama: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2009).

[52.] Stephen Davies, "Richard Cobden: Ideas and Strategies in Organizing the Free-Trade Movement in Britain," *Liberty Matters* (January 2015) </pages/lm-cobden>.

[53.] John Blundell, "Arthur Seldon and the Institute of Economic Affairs," *Liberty Matters* (November, 2013) </pages/seldon-and-the-iea>.

[54.] Harriet Martineau, *Illustrations of Political Economy* (3rd ed) in 9 vols. (London: Charles Fox, 1832). </titles/1873>.

[55.] Thomas Paine, *Common Sense: Addressed to the Inhabitants of America, on the following Interesting Subjects, viz.: I. Of the Origin and Design of Government in General; with Concise Remarks on the English Constitution. II. Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession. III. Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs. IV. Of the Present Ability of America; with some Miscellaneous Reflections.* (Philadelphia: Printed, and Sold, by R. Bell, in Third Street. MDCCLXXVI). In *The Writings of Thomas Paine, Collected and Edited by Moncure Daniel Conway* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1894). Vol. 1. /titles/343#lf0548-01_label_074.

[56.] Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (Random House, 1957).

[57.] Milton Friedman and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1980; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980). It was made into a 10-part TV documentary series, "Free to Choose," broadcast by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS).

[58.] John Papola and Russ Roberts, "Fear the Boom and Bust" (2010), EconStories <https://www.youtube.com/user/EconStories>. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d0nERTFo-Sk>.

[59.] My title is borrowed from Richard Cobden, *What Next and Next?* (London: James Ridgway, 1856). </titles/2652>. Also in Richard Cobden, *The Political Writings of Richard Cobden, with a Preface by Lord Welby, Introductions by Sir Louis Mallet, C.B., and William Cullen Bryant, Notes by F.W. Chesson and a Bibliography*, vol. 2, (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1903). "What Next and Next?" /titles/231#lf0424-02_head_008.

CRISES CAN BE NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE

by David M. Hart

Peter Mentzel has raised a crucial issue, namely, the role that political, economic, or "systemic" crises play in bringing about radical change. But as he is of course aware, crises can provoke change in a pro-liberty or an anti-liberty direction, depending upon the underlying ideological inclination of the society concerned. I call the former "positive crises" and the latter "negative crises."



Robert Higgs

Because of the seminal work of Robert Higgs,^[60] it is natural to associate crises, especially those in the 20th century like World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the attacks of 9/11, and the Great Recession of 2008, with dramatic increases in the size and scope of state power. However, this is not necessarily the inevitable outcome of a systemic crisis. In previous centuries such a crisis might have resulted in the very opposite, namely, opportunities for expanding the scope of liberty. Here are some examples of "positive crises" :

- The financial crisis faced by both the British and French empires following the military conflict for control of North America in the 1750s and 1760s led to the imposition of new taxes and economic controls in the American colonies, which in turn led to the American Revolution . An even greater fiscal crisis in France led to the failed liberal reforms of Turgot in the mid-1770s and the King's calling the Estates General in 1788 to vote for new taxes -- causing the political deadlock that led eventually to the liberal phase of the French Revolution (1789-1793). The financial crises in both countries took place when economic and political ideas had been

moving in a liberal direction as a result of the Enlightenment, the Physiocratic economists in France, and the Smithian school in Britain. The demands of the reformers in 1776 and 1789 were liberal, and the old regimes in both instances either collapsed or were defeated by revolutionary violence.

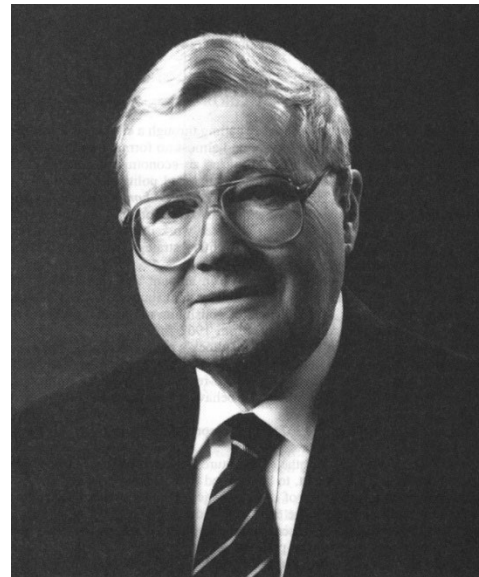
- The crop failures, rising food prices, and political repression of democratic, liberal, working-class, and socialist groups in the 1840s in Europe resulted in a nearly continent-wide series of uprisings known as the "1848 Revolutions." New constitutional governments were established (some temporary, some more long-lasting); bills of rights were written; and the face of Europe was changed for good. However, because of the complex mix of ideological movements in play at the time -- classical-liberal, socialist, conservative/monarchist, Bonapartist, and of course nationalist -- the political outcomes of the crises were quite mixed. Many historians have concluded that the 1848 Revolutions "failed" in the sense that they did not result in an unequivocally new, revolutionary regime . But a more-considered conclusion would be that the regimes which returned to power after the revolutions had to make considerable concessions to liberal principles, creating post-1848 regimes very different from the pre-1848 regimes. These concessions would include much greater freedom of the press and association, and constitutional limits on kingly power, free trade, etc.
- Post -World War II Germany was in ruins and was occupied by the British, French, American, and Russian armies. All four armies shared the same hostility to free markets, free prices, and entrepreneurial activity of any kind (including smuggling, black markets, etc.), which is not surprising since all armies are in essence forms of bureaucratic socialism, or what Mises would call *Zwangswirtschaft* (economy based on force) or,

to coin a phrase, *Zwangsgesellschaft* (society based on force). The rampant unemployment, industrial inactivity, shortages, and black markets required drastic, even revolutionary action to establish real prices and allow markets in labor, goods, and services to clear. Ludwig Wilhelm Erhard (1897-1977), who was minister of economics under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, unilaterally decreed the abolition of most price controls one weekend in 1949 while the American military wasn't paying attention (they were probably on golf courses built with American taxpayer's money), thus launching the German *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle). The ideas behind this action came from a small group of liberal conservatives in Freiburg known as "Ordo" liberals.

- Finally, there was the massive program of deregulation which took place in New Zealand during the Labor government of David Lange, whose minister of finance in 1984 was Roger Douglas. New Zealand faced a series of economic crises following the signing of the Closer Economic Relations agreement with Australia in 1981 (which lowered tariff barriers and eliminated visas for travel between the two countries) and a currency crisis which led to the devaluation of the NZ dollar. New Zealand had become one of the most heavily regulated economies in the industrialized world by the early 1980s. A new generation of Labor politicians (supposedly left-wing) realized by sheer necessity that the economy required significant deregulation and the removal of tariffs and subsidies to industry. Douglas pursued such a policy, which also included deregulating finance markets and removing restrictions on interest rates and foreign exchange. His program was called "Rogernomics" (after "Reaganomics," 1981-1989) and was ideologically anchored in the free-market ideas which were also influencing Britain under Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph

("Thatcherism," 1979-90), and Prime Minister Bob Hawke and Treasurer Paul Keating in Australia ("Economic Rationalism," 1983-91). An interesting and unexpected side benefit of Lange's reformist government was the introduction of a "nuclear free zone" around New Zealand, which led to the banning of U.S. warships from docking at any New Zealand ports.

It is hard to see a similar "positive crisis" emerging in the near future. The ideological framework has changed so much back towards statism that any future crisis would most likely lead to a radical increase in state power. Many economists thought that Keynesian economics had been weakened by its obvious policy failures in the 1970s and 1980s ("stagflation" -- simultaneous economic stagnation and inflation) and the spread of free-market ideas in academia: Chicago-school monetarism, Buchanan- and Tullock-inspired Public Choice, and a newly invigorated Austrian school. However, when the Great Financial Crisis of 2007-8 erupted, the mainstream economists stampeded back into the Keynesian corral.



Gordon Tullock

We have also seen the monumental expansion of the American surveillance, police, and military state since 9/11. With two failed wars already under its belt (Afghanistan, Iraq) and four more potential conflicts on

the horizon (Iraq again, Syria, Iran, and Ukraine) the institutional and ideological momentum towards further growth in state power seems unstoppable. I fear that any future crisis will be a "negative crisis," at least in the short term.

One potential silver lining in a very dark cloud is that the next systemic crisis might lead to the breakup of the mega-states of the European Union and the United States under the combined pressure of massive debt (for both state and crony banks) and the consequences of the massive "Quantitative Easing," which both central banks have inflicted upon the "real," or productive, sectors of their economies but which have not yet been unleashed in their full fury.

Endnotes

[60.] Robert Higgs, *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government* (First edition Oxford University Press, 1987. Independent Institute, 25th Anniversary edition, 2013).

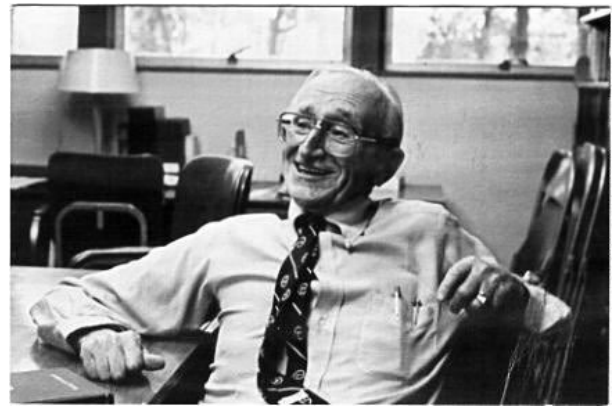
THE ALOOF ACADEMIC HAYEK VS. THE INTELLECTUAL ENTREPRENEUR ROTHBARD

by David M. Hart

David Gordon raises some good points about the differences in strategic vision held by the two Austrian economists Hayek and Rothbard. I would like to thank him for bringing to my attention the Volker Fund memo on strategy which Rothbard had written in 1961, some 14 years before the pieces I quoted in my essay.[61] I hadn't realized he had been thinking along those lines as early as that.

I still think there is a clear distinction between the two men's ideas about the correct strategy for promoting classical-liberal ideas, which reinforces my point about there being a significant opposition between their positions. For most of his scholarly life Hayek focused

almost exclusively on the highest order of the production of ideas, first in economics (capital theory) and then in political theory (the *Law, Legislation, and Liberty* trilogy).[62] He made only two efforts to speak to a broader audience (i.e., to move down the structure of production of ideas to a lower level): first with *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) and the significant impact in the United States of the *Reader's Digest* abridgment (today it might be titled *Serfdom for Dummies*),[63] the popular success of which genuinely surprised Hayek; and more seriously, *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960), the failure of which in the popular market also genuinely surprised him.[64]



F. A. Hayek

Hayek also made a number of serious strategic blunders, which suggest that the advice which he was to give in 1949 in "The Intellectuals and Socialism" had not been part of his thinking in the mid-1930s. As one of the leading lights of the Austrian school in the 1930s, he had not applied the coup de grace to Keynes's theories when he had the opportunity to do so and when it would have had the most impact, before Keynesianism became the new postwar statist orthodoxy and the building of the modern welfare state began in earnest. He chose precisely this time to turn away from economic theory and move towards legal and political theory, thus leaving the gate wide open for Keynes and his supporters.

Hayek's second strategic error, though perhaps not entirely his fault given his age (he was born in 1899) and his weak position at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, was his failure to build up a school of young scholars around him to further develop

his free-market ideas. He seemed not to grasp the importance of creating a second generation of scholars via a Ph.D. program who could then go out to other colleges and universities to sow the seeds of economic liberalism. Although he had some graduate students (the historians Ralph Raico and Ronald Hamowy spring to mind) he did not build a school of thought around him, as Mises and Rothbard attempted to do. Thus he remained locked in the intellectual ghetto of the highest order production of ideas with no economics graduate students and only a small audience of dedicated readers.

Rothbard, on the other hand, was both an original scholar and an intellectual entrepreneur who was acutely aware of the importance of promoting activity in all the stages of the production of ideas, from highest to lowest, even if he could not see all of them to fruition because of his limited resources. He and Leonard Liggio were active in the antiwar movement in New York City in the 1960s, reaching out to members of the antiwar New Left and the student movement; they embraced the middle-order Cato Institute and the lowest order Libertarian Party, at least initially. Incidentally, Liggio moved into the middle-order Institute for Humane Studies and then the upper order Atlas Network and Liberty Fund in his later years.

Rothbard's movement up and down the structure of production of ideas, from highest to lowest, over his lifetime makes him stand out as a unique example of the scholar and intellectual entrepreneur, certainly compared to Hayek, who lacked the skills, the motivation, and the institutional framework to do anything else than what he did. Rothbard's close participation in the Mises Institute gave him the opportunity to be active in several orders of the production of ideas at once, which both suited his personality and his strategic vision.

Endnotes

[61.] Rothbard, "What Is To be Done?" (Memorandum of July 1961), in *Strictly Confidential: The Private Volker Fund Memos of Murray N. Rothbard*, ed. David Gordon. Foreword by Brian Doherty (Auburn, Alabama: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2010), pp. 7-23.

[62.] Hayek's *Law, Legislation, and Liberty* trilogy: *Law, Legislation, and Liberty: A New Statement of the Liberal Principles of Justice and Political Economy*. Vol. 1. *Rules and Order* (The University of Chicago Press, 1973); vol. 2 *The Mirage of Social Justice* (1976); vol. 3 *The Political Order of a Free People* (1979).

[63.] Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom, with The Intellectuals and Socialism. The Condensed Version of The Road to Serfdom as it appeared in the April 1945 edition of Reader's Digest* (London: The Institute of Economic Affairs, 2005), with "The Road to Serfdom in Cartoons," originally published in *Look* magazine.

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DEVELOPING A MASS MOVEMENT FOR LIBERTY

by Jim Powell

I offer a simplified view of how a political movement develops in three stages.

First, a few people share a passion for liberty. From time to time they get together and talk about it, but not much else happens.

Second, think tanks, research institutions, youth groups, and other organizations busily develop libertarians ideas that gradually attract people interested in liberty.

Third, multiple efforts go into developing peaceful mass movements, mobilizing large numbers of people to put pressure on politicians. These are *not* election campaigns. Peaceful mass movements continue as long as necessary, until proposed bills are enacted or until targeted laws are passed or court decisions are reversed.

I would say that the libertarian movement in the United States is at stage two. Perhaps more people than ever are involved with the libertarian movement. The focus is on talks, seminars, courses, podcasts, book forums, etc., developing ideas and policies. Many books are written, though almost all the books are nonfiction and

few make a bestseller list. Most of the nonfiction books are about economics; a few are about law and history; even fewer are on other relevant topics. Many libertarian websites exist, though few are in the top 100 for web traffic. Few libertarians publish commercial fiction with libertarian themes, and few libertarian children's books are available. Most of the small number of libertarian film-makers seem to work on documentaries. There's very little humor and not much is done for TV.

All this is a huge improvement over a half-century ago, but we're a long way from generating serious pressure on politicians.

More will likely be done with libertarian ideas, but if large numbers of people aren't mobilized for public events, years from now we could still find ourselves at stage two.

If we aren't able to advance to stage three, another terrorist attack on the United States, a war with Russia, or something else could lead to more expansions of government power; or we might get another president determined to "govern from the left" and to get away with trashing constitutional limitations on his power. Hopes for more liberty could be blown away for decades or longer, when political opposition could become illegal. We cannot exclude the possibility of a new dark age.

Libertarian ideas are unlikely to prevail until we get to stage three. That stage involves a peaceful mass movement to mobilize large numbers of people to pressure politicians to support liberty by enacting some laws and repealing others. A peaceful mass movement is basically what you can do in a democracy when politicians fail to respond to demands.

Movements die when politicians do things to subvert liberty and no political consequences follow. If a peaceful mass movement is successful, it will play an important role in defeating politicians who thwart liberty. We want them coming to us, seeking support for their reelection. We need to target our most important

opponents in power, politicians whose defeat will send a clear signal to others who stand in our way.

The mass movement itself wouldn't get involved in election campaigns – there's plenty to be done organizing events and mobilizing large numbers of people – but media reports about our crowds would provide the essential "platform" for gaining clout against our political adversaries. I don't recall that Martin Luther King Jr. ever got involved with an election campaign, but by attracting a crowd estimated at 250,000, he put irresistible pressure on Congress.

It will probably help for friends of liberty to become more familiar with how peaceful mass movements develop. These are major ones: (1) the movement to abolish the British slave trade and slavery in British colonies in the Caribbean; (2) the movement to abolish the English Corn Laws and achieve free trade; (3) the American abolitionist movement; (4) the movement to abolish slavery in Brazil, the last slave society in the Western Hemisphere; (5) the movement to abolish slavery in the Congo, the last Western-controlled slave society; (6) the movement for Irish Emancipation, to abolish civil disabilities for the Irish; (7) the movement to achieve equal rights for women; (8) the movement to achieve independence for India; (9) the movement to abolish compulsory racial segregation in the United States.

Although it's always tough to draw a good crowd, and even tougher to keep doing it long enough to achieve political clout, a victory can have a salutary impact for a long time.

True, it's hard to imagine scholarly libertarians mobilizing large numbers of people. What to do? The short answer is that we need to recruit people with somewhat different talents than have dominated the libertarian movement until now.

Some existing organizations could help support the effort to mobilize large numbers of people for a peaceful mass movement, and perhaps a new organization needs to be started, one that would have

the strongest incentive to build such a movement, because it wouldn't have anything else to do.

The peaceful mass movements I cited all made appeals to justice, and I believe we should do that, too -- liberty and justice. We must engage people's minds and hearts.

Such an organization would recruit prospective organizers. It could show them how to raise money, identify resources (like musicians) who could play a role in events, how to get permissions needed (such as from a town when an event is contemplated in a public park or a neighborhood where residents might complain), how to arrange security (so our adversaries don't try to disrupt an event), how to publicize an event, and so on.



What might an event be like?

Imagine music about liberty being played as people arrive, starting with this upbeat theme song that has great lyrics:

- "Freedom" (from the musical Shenandoah (1975) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BahoT7cKOys>>. This was originally performed as a lively duet (see second Shenandoah clip <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9cdEZDcTuM>>

The master of ceremonies (MC) welcomes the crowd and thanks them for coming to help support the cause of liberty and justice. The MC then introduces the first speaker, who talks for five minutes about the ominous trends towards more arbitrary power, corruption, and injustice.

- the song and video of "Taxman" by the Beatles is played <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HB6DsUMx-k>>

The MC introduces the second speaker, who talks for five minutes about a few of the greatest peaceful mass movements and how the present protest is part of that glorious tradition.

- the song and video of "We Shall Overcome" by Joan Baez is shown <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkNsEH1GD7Q>>

The MC introduces the third speaker, who talks for five minutes about recent peaceful resistance movements, such as the student movement in Venezuela, that have made a difference even in authoritarian regimes

- video of the "Marseillaise" scene from the film *Casablanca* is shown <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HM-E2H1ChJM>>

The MC introduces the fourth speaker, who talks for five minutes about what students can do now.

- video of *Independence Day* by Martina McBride (Farm Aid 2001: Concert for America in Noblesville, Indiana on September 29, 2001) (the whole song, which is a protest against drunken domestic violence, or just use the glorious 3rd stanza which is more generalized) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Q3LyECse3g>>

The MC introduces the fifth speaker, who talks for five minutes about what seniors can do now.

- video of "America" by Neil Diamond <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTSLRbm8L9E>>

The MC introduces the sixth speaker, who talks for five minutes about what business people can do now.

- video of "Let the River Run" by Carly Simon
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cv-0mmVnxPA>>

The MC introduces the seventh speaker, who talks for five minutes about what people can do in their communities now.

- documentary about how to mobilize large numbers of people (this would have to be put together)

The master of ceremonies concludes with some final inspirational words and thanks the audience for coming.

Freedom music plays as people talk and leave (no video).

- "Freedom" (from the musical Shenandoah, reprise)
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BahoT7cKOys>>
- "Amazing Grace" (Judy Collins)
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5NCyuRhoGY>> (Judy Collins "Amazing Grace" with Boys' Choir Of Harlem 1993).
- "Let It Be" (Beatles)
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcBnlw-H2wQ>>

How might this program be modified? It might take place on a campus and be aimed exclusively at students. An all-senior event might be scheduled at or near a senior community. Initially, it might go without a documentary, or a documentary could be used later in the program. Musical attractions might be added. Leading citizens or local celebrities might be persuaded to attend.

Hopefully, some competition might develop as libertarians try their own variations in different places, each aiming for bigger crowds and more local supporters. A local steering committee might be recruited in each case.

There's probably much we can learn from other organizations about putting together events, dealing with crowds, generating publicity, and so on.

Onward and upward!

CREDIBILITY AND SHIFTS IN PUBLIC OPINION

by George H. Smith

In his article "[The European Witch-craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries](#)" (1967), Hugh Trevor-Roper addressed a problem that had engaged the attention of previous historians of witchcraft, namely: Why did arguments against witchcraft apparently convince few readers when proposed during, say, the late 1500s, yet a century later those same arguments were widely accepted as definitive? That puzzle, Trevor-Roper concluded, "[is mysterious still.](#)"^[65]

Trevor-Roper briefly considered how "nineteenth-century liberal historians" dealt with this problem, only to reject their explanations as overly rationalistic. They viewed the witchcraft controversy as part of the ongoing battle between reason and superstition. "[At first,](#)" according to those liberal historians, "it was a losing battle, but at last persistence brought its reward: the tide turned and the battle was won." Today, however, "such a distinction between 'reason' and 'superstition' is difficult to maintain," because it fails to take the relevant social and intellectual conditions of a given historical context into account.^[66]

Although Trevor-Roper did not discuss the ideas of W.E.H. Lecky specifically, Lecky's name is included in his list of liberal, rationalistic historians who supposedly gave simplistic accounts of how important intellectual changes occur over time. Lecky was mentioned because of his lengthy chapter on "[Magic and Witchcraft](#)" in *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*, first published in 1861. But Trevor-Roper could not have read Lecky very carefully, for Lecky's explanation of the decline of belief in witches does not

conform to Trevor-Roper's stereotype; it is far more complex and sophisticated.



Hugh Trevor-Roper

Before proceeding, I should explain why I have introduced the topic of witchcraft in a discussion concerned with the spread of classical-liberal ideas. When Lecky and other 19th-century rationalist historians discussed the rise and fall of belief in witches, they typically viewed this issue as part of the broader problem of how public opinion changes, and they applied their reasoning on this topic to a broader range of issues, including dramatic shifts in public opinion about political issues. That broader framework is directly relevant to the topic of this forum. Lecky in particular had some important ideas on this subject that are worthy of our consideration.

Before explaining some particulars of Lecky's theory of intellectual change, I shall attempt to summarize it in my own words and then apply it to the problem of how public opinion shifted in favor of classical-liberal ideas during the 18th and 19th centuries.

As Lecky saw the matter, we will not take the time and effort to examine a new approach to, say, a political problem unless we first regard that approach as *credible*. To say that a belief system is credible is not to say that it has been justified; rather, it is merely to say that the belief system is taken seriously enough that significant numbers of people will invest the intellectual labor needed to determine whether or not it can be justified sufficiently

to merit acceptance. In this respect there can be no doubt that classical-liberal, or libertarian, ideas have made significant advances over the past 50 years. Although still not part of the intellectual mainstream, libertarian ideas are at least regarded as credible enough to be debated in public forums and defended by serious intellectuals. This is an essential first step in changing public opinion. A belief system that lacks credibility will never gain enough traction to become a serious contender in the court of public opinion.

As Lecky put it in his discussion of Montaigne's early skepticism about witchcraft, such skepticism did not arise from "any formal examination of evidence" about witchcraft, but "from a deep sense of the antecedent improbability."^[67] Lecky quoted Montaigne as follows:

There are proofs and arguments [for witchcraft] that are founded on experience and facts. I do not pretend to unravel them. I often cut them, as Alexander did the knot. After all, it is setting a high value upon our opinions, to roast men alive on account of them.^[68]

Lecky attributed Montaigne's influence not to any particular arguments but to his pioneering contributions to the spirit of rationalism, that is, to his use of a new standard of credibility when assessing empirical claims.

The vast mass of authority which those writers [sophisticated defenders of witchcraft, such as Bodin] loved to array, and by which they shaped the whole course of their reasoning, is calmly and unhesitatingly discarded. The passion for the miraculous, the absorbing sense of diabolical capacities, have all vanished like a dream. *The old theological measure of probability has completely disappeared*, and is replaced by a shrewd secular common sense. The statements [i.e., confessions] of the witches were pronounced *intrinsically incredible*. The dreams of a disordered imagination, or the terrors of the rack, would account for many of them; but *even when it is impossible to explain away the evidence, it is quite unnecessary to do so.* [My italics.]^[69]

Consider also the remarkable 1584 book by Reginald Scott, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*. According to Lecky, Scott “[unmasked the imposture and the delusion of the system](#) with a boldness that no previous writer had approached, and with an ability which few subsequent writers have equaled.” Yet his book “exercised no appreciable influence. Witchcraft depended on general causes, and represented the prevailing modes of religious thought. It was therefore entirely unaffected by the attempted refutation...”^[70]

The belief in witchcraft declined, argued Lecky, not because of specific arguments against that belief but rather because of a radical if gradual shift in the prevailing public standard of credibility; naturalistic methods of explanation replaced supernaturalistic methods as the dominant default setting, so to speak. Thereafter arguments in favor of witchcraft, however detailed and backed with empirical evidence, were dismissed out of hand as inherently improbable or impossible. Knowledge claims that lack credibility, as I noted previously, will not be taken seriously enough to merit close examination. And this is largely what we mean when we speak of a change in public opinion. This does not mean that every or even most members of a society will agree on every significant issue. Rather, it means that members of a society will generally agree on which beliefs are credible and which are not.

The application of this viewpoint to the problem of how classical-liberal ideas came to be accepted in the past should be obvious. A general understanding of the basic tenets of classical-liberal ideas, such as spontaneous order, was required, along with a general skepticism about the ability of government planning to accomplish its stated goals. In other words, a shift in the public perception of the fundamental standards of economic and political credibility had to occur. There needed to be a strong and widespread skepticism about the efficacy of government measures and, perhaps even more important, an assumption that most politicians exercised power for their own benefit rather than for some nebulous goal called “the public good.” And these were precisely the

arguments that we find in the most influential and successful liberal writers from earlier centuries.

Endnotes

[65.] Hugh Trevor Roper, *The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century: Religion, the Reformation, and Social Change*. (Originally published : New York, Harper & Row, 1967. Reprinted: Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 2001), 162. <[/titles/719](#)>.

[66.] Ibid., 163

[67.] W.E.H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe* (New York: George Braziller, 1955), I: 115. Online at the OLL: William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe, Revised edition* (New York: D. Appleton, 1919). 2 vols. <[/titles/1871](#)>.

[68.] Ibid., I:111.

[69.] Ibid.

[70.] Ibid., I: 122-23.

REVOLUTIONARY MOMENTS AND THE EXPANSION OF PRODUCTION OF PAMPHLETS

by David M. Hart

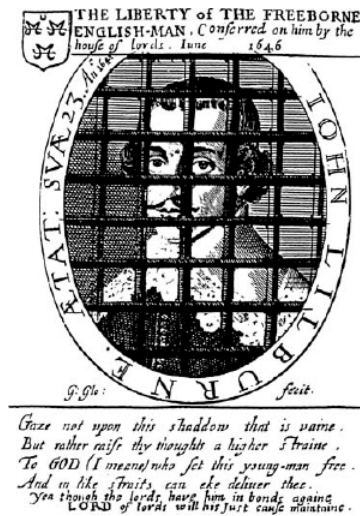
In periods of political and ideological turmoil, an explosion in the production of ideas -- through books, pamphlets, newspapers, and other kinds of propaganda -- often takes place. This has both a demand and a supply side to it. On the supply side, people everywhere, including ordinary working people, suddenly feel the need to say something about the current problems they are facing. Often there is also a breakdown in censorship as the established political authority begins to lose its legitimacy or ability to use force, thus allowing more producers, such as printers and book sellers, to publish and distribute pamphlets and tracts. On the demand side, more people wish to read the things that

these other people are saying, many of whom are "new voices" who were repressed under the old regime. On both the supply side and the demand side classical liberals and libertarians have played a part in these "ideological explosions," sometimes even an important part. More often than not, the liberal voices get drowned out by the greater number of their opponents or are silenced by the political repression which typically follows these revolutionary moments. I offer the following three examples :

- 1640s and 1650s in England -- the publication of thousands of Leveller tracts and pamphlets during the English Civil Wars, revolution, and Republic.
- 1750-60s and 1780s in America -- the pamphlet literature in the period leading up to and during the American revolutionary period and the debate about the Constitution in the late 1780s (Federalists vs. Anti-Federalists).
- 1848-49 in France -- the creation of hundreds of political clubs and revolutionary newspapers, pamphlets, and wall posters.

All three examples show the much larger pool of people who had opinions about liberty than are normally visible in non revolutionary times. They seem to exist below the surface and only emerge in revolutionary moments when new opportunities arise for the expression of political views.

The most libertarian and the best-known of these three examples is the American one, so I will not say much about it other than to note two important collections of pamphlet literature by Bernard Bailyn and Herbert Storing.^[71]



The Levellers Tracts

My first example are the proto-libertarians of the 1640s who were named by their ideological opponents as "The Levellers" because they wished to "level," or abolish, many kinds of political privilege which favored the established Church, the king, the aristocratic land owners, and the merchant class. The Levellers became active in the early 1640s with the publication of a series of pamphlets which often led to their arrest and imprisonment (from which they often wrote additional pamphlets they had smuggled out to be printed). Their ideas became influential in the New Model Army and formed the basis for the Army's political demands for reform made to Parliament and King Charles in several "Petitions of the People" in 1647 and 1648. The sheer number of pamphlets produced by the Levellers, their critics, and the numerous fellow travelers who joined in the debates is striking. An English book seller by the name of George Thomason, who lived in London, collected as many of these tracts as he could lay his hands on between 1640 and 1663. Thomason collected 22,255 pamphlets, manuscripts, and newspapers, with the peak period being 1642 -1649. In 1642 and 1648 the number of titles published exceeded 2,000. They all form the core of the British Museum's collection of political tracts from the period.^[72]

The influence of the Levellers waned after the coming to power of the dictator Oliver Cromwell and the political repression which he imposed in the 1650s. The three key

Leveller figures were Richard Overton, John Lilburne, and William Walwyn, whose ideas about individual liberty, property rights, religious toleration, the rule of law, and free trade are remarkably modern- sounding and thus justify us classifying them as the intellectual founding fathers of modern classical liberalism. Annabel Patterson has gone so far as to call them and their generation "early modern liberals," which I think is apt. [73] For too long, the Levellers have been appropriated by the Marxists and the left as their intellectual forefathers. See for example the voluminous work by the English Marxist Christopher Hill on the Levellers and the English Revolution [74] and it is true that there was a communitarian fringe to the Leveller movement (exemplified by Gerrard Winstanley), which modern Marxists might find attractive. However, the center of the movement was solidly individualist and in favor of private property. Only a handful of modern libertarians have given them due recognition, such as Walter Grinder, Carl Watner [75], James Otteson, and Michael Zuckert. [76] Otteson especially has edited an important five-volume collection of their writings for a mainstream publisher. [77]

However, even Otteson has neglected to show the true range of individuals who were influenced by Leveller (or rather liberal) ideas and who wrote their own pamphlets, or the range of topics they discussed and the style which they used to discuss them. I believe the 1640s was a true flowering of classical-liberal political expression, which involved many new types of authors and commentators such as artisans, informed workers, and even some women. These new voices discussed less well- known topics (not just Magna Carta, the sovereignty of Parliament, or religious toleration), such as the ban on selling food and drink on Sundays, taxes on soap, and who could or could not use "common land" or preach to congregations. They also used a much greater variety of formats for discussing liberal ideas which went far beyond the traditional prose pamphlet form, such as songs, satirical poems, and mini-plays, which appealed to a less scholarly audience of readers. The typesetters who prepared many of Lilburne's or Overton's pamphlets also used their creative skills to devise elaborate title pages with lines of type making interesting shapes such as

pyramids, hour glasses, or bowls to add additional meaning to the words on the pages. No doubt many of the men engaged in the printing trade were politically aware and possibly active as well in the events which were going on around them. In many cases, the author or the printer used fictitious names and places of publication in order to taunt and mock the censors whom they knew would be after them. The following by Richard Overton is a good example of this:

By Yongue Martin Mar-Priest, Son to old Martin the Metropolitane. This is Licenced, and printed according to Holy Order, but not Entered into the Stationers Monopole. Europe. Printed by Martin Claw Clergie, Printer to the Reverend Assembly of Divines and are to be should (sold) at his Shop in Toleration Street, at the Signe of the Subjects Liberty, right opposite to Persecuting Court. 1645.

To show this more popular, radical, and creative side to Leveller (liberal) ideas in this period, I have been editing and putting online a larger and more comprehensive collection of Leveller tracts. Two volumes have so far appeared, and five more are in the works. [78] Two typical title pages are shown below:

The title page below comes from an anonymous pamphlet published in 1641 entitled "The lamentable complaints of Nick Froth the tapster, and Rulerost the cooke. Concerning the restraint lately set forth, against drinking, potting, and piping on the Sabbath day, and against selling meate." Note the crude woodcut illustration which accompanies this plea for liberalised trading hours.

A couple of questions naturally come to mind: where did the Levellers get their liberal ideas , and why did so many English people take action at this time in the name of these ideas? Concerning the first question, three obvious sources are the Bible (their pamphlets are peppered with selected pro-liberty and anti-royalist quotes from the Bible), Magna Carta and English Parliamentarism, and the long tradition of popular thinking about the traditional "rights of Englishmen." Concerning the second, historians are still debating the causes of the systemic "crisis of the seventeenth century," but war and

taxes played their inevitable role in provoking popular opposition.^[79]



Magna Carta signing

One wonders when the next explosion of liberal "pamphleteering" will take place, what forms it will take, and what impact it will have. Perhaps we are living through it right now with the blogging phenomenon and the part being played by classical liberals and free-market economists?

In a future post I will discuss my third example, liberal pamphleteering during the 1848 Revolution in France, in which Frédéric Bastiat and Gustave de Molinari played a key role.

Endnotes

[71.] *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-1776*, edited by Bernard Bailyn, with the assistance of Jane N. Garrett. (Cambridge, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965-). Four volumes were proposed, but only one appeared; the introduction was published separately as Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967). On the Anti-Federalists see *The Complete Anti-Federalist*, edited, with commentary and notes, by Herbert J. Storing with the assistance of Murray Dry. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). 7 vols.; the introduction was also published separately as *What the Anti-Federalists Were For*, Herbert J. Storing with the

editorial assistance of Murray Dry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

[72.] *Catalogue of the Pamphlets, Books, Newspapers, and Manuscripts relating to the Civil War, the Commonwealth, and Restoration, collected by George Thomason, 1640-1661*. 2 vols. (London: William Cowper and Sons, 1908).

[73.] Annabel M. Patterson, *Early Modern Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[74.] Christopher Hill, *The World turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972).

[75.] Carl Watner, "‘Come What, Come Will!’ Richard Overton, Libertarian Leveller," *The Journal of Libertarian Studies*, vol. IV, no. 4 (Fall 1980), pp. 405- 32.

[76.] Michael P. Zuckert, *Natural Rights and the New Republicanism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[77.] *The Levellers: Overton, Walwyn and Lilburne*. Edited and introduced by James R. Otteson (Thoemmes Press, 2003). 5 vols.

[78.] *Tracts on Liberty by the Levellers and their Critics* (1638-1660), 7 vols. Edited by David M. Hart and Ross Kenyon (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2014-15). <[/titles/2595](#)>. Volumes 1 and 3 are online. See the *Combined Table of Contents of the Tracts on Liberty by the Levellers and their Critics* (1638-1660), 7 vols. <[/pages/leveller-tracts-table-of-contents](#)>; and a "Bibliography and Other Resources on the Levellers" <[/pages/leveller-tracts-bibliography](#)>.

[79.] The expression "crisis of the seventeenth century" was coined by Eric Hobsbawm in 1954 in a series of articles which appeared in the journal *Past and Present*. This was followed by a similar work by Hugh Trevor-Roper in a 1959 article entitled "The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century," *Past and Present*, vol. 16 (1959). This has been republished by Liberty Fund in Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century: Religion, the Reformation and Social Change* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001). <[/titles/719](#)>.

WHY DOES PUBLIC OPINION EVER CHANGE?

by Peter Mentzel

George Smith's recent post offers some important insights into our conversation and sharpens some of the points David pointed to in his opening essay and subsequent comments. In particular, I was struck by George's observation that changes in behavior seem to occur slowly as a result of a change in "public opinion." If this is correct (and I think it is) it prompts several other questions that should be of interest to us.

Drawing on Lecky's work, George argues that public opinion changes when certain heretofore ignored or marginal ideas become "credible." (Importantly, I think that George's insight here is very close to the point that Kuznicki made in his essay about the importance of libertarian ideas seeming "reasonable.") In George's example, when "naturalistic ideas" about the physical universe became credible, they eventually pushed out older "supernatural" explanations of various phenomena to the point that the belief in witches was dismissed out of hand as not credible. We can describe this sort of development in other ways using all sorts of fancy terms like *Tiefkultur* and *Zeitgeist*, but what we are essentially talking about is the importance of change "from below." Yet this explanation in some ways only pushes the explanatory horizon back a step. Even if we say that great changes in *Weltanschauung* are the result of changes in public opinion, don't we still have to explain how public opinion changes? As far as I can tell, George doesn't offer an account of that in his short comment. To put it in his terms, what brought about "the radical if gradual shift in the prevailing public standard of credibility" that eventually led to public rejection of witch burning?

So, it seems to me that we are thrown back into the arms of the basic question David posed at the start of this conversation: What changes ideas? What ideas changed public opinion about witch burning? While George is surely right that *specific* arguments against

burning witches could not get any sort of purchase on public opinion until it was already inclined away from supernatural explanations, we still have to come up with some sort of story about how these "anti-supernatural" arguments eventually won the day.

W.E.H. LECKY VERSUS J.M. ROBERTSON ON HOW PUBLIC OPINION CHANGES

by George H. Smith

In my last comment I summarized the views of the rationalist and classical-liberal historian W.E.H. Lecky on the process of intellectual change. In this comment I will explain the criticisms that Lecky's account elicited from J.M. Robertson, a leading Victorian atheist whose four volumes on the history of freethought remain unsurpassed to this day.

As I explained previously, Lecky did not believe that significant intellectual changes, or shifts in public opinion, are caused primarily by *specific* arguments in favor of a new position, nor are they usually caused by new information (though new information may provoke new questions and doubts about established beliefs). As Lecky wrote in the Preface to *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe* (1861):

[A change of speculative opinions](#) does not imply an increase of the data upon which those opinions rest, but a change of the habits of thought and mind which they reflect. Definite arguments are the symptoms and pretexts, but seldom the causes of the change. Their chief merit is to accelerate the inevitable crisis. They derive their force and efficacy from their conformity with the mental habits of those to whom they are addressed. Reasoning which in one age would make no impression whatever, in the next age is received with enthusiastic applause.[\[80\]](#)

Corroboration of Lecky's thesis may be found in a commonly noted example in the history of classical liberalism. We are often told—with some exaggeration, in my opinion—that few if any economic arguments in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* were original, that his arguments had been defended by earlier economic thinkers. Those earlier incarnations, however, had relatively little influence on public opinion, whereas the impact of *The Wealth of Nations* was profound. So why this difference? Why did essentially the same arguments for free trade and related proposals have dramatically different outcomes at different times? The standard explanation (which I do not entirely accept) has to do with the “spirit of the age,” or the “climate of opinion,” or what we now call “public opinion.” By the time Smith presented his free-trade arguments, public opinion was in a receptive stage. The ground for Smith's viewpoint had already been laid by various social and economic events and conditions, and by earlier arguments along the same line.



Adam Smith

This method of explanation is similar to that employed by Lecky to explain a wide range of intellectual changes. According to Lecky, public opinion in a given age and country will depend on the “standard of belief” – a notion (as explained in my last comment) that is closely related to public credibility, i.e., to widely accepted criteria that

determine which beliefs qualify as probable or improbable, possible or impossible, and so on. In a passage that reads, in part, as if it could have been written by Hayek, Lecky said:

And this standard of belief, this tone and habit of thought, which is the supreme arbiter of the opinions of successive periods, is created, not by the influences arising out of any one department of intellect, but by the combination of all the intellectual and even social tendencies of the age. Those who contribute most largely to its formation are, I believe, the philosophers. Men like Bacon, Descartes, and Locke have probably done more than any others to set the current of their age. They have formed a certain cast and tone of mind. They have introduced peculiar habits of thought, new modes of reasoning, new tendencies of enquiry. The impulse they have given to the higher literature, has been by that literature communicated to the more popular writers; and the impress of these master-minds is clearly visible in the writings of multitudes who are totally unacquainted with their works. But philosophical methods, great and unquestionable as is their power, form but one of the many influences that contribute to the mental habits of society.[81]

In Lecky's judgment, free trade and other manifestations of individual freedom were not caused solely by intellectual arguments; social and psychological factors contributed as well.

Thus the commercial or municipal spirit exhibits certain habits of thought, certain modes of reasoning, certain repugnances and attractions, which make it invariably tend to one class of opinions. To encourage the occupations that produce this spirit, is to encourage the opinions that are most congenial to it. It is impossible to lay down a railway without creating an intellectual influence. It is probable that Watt and Stephenson will eventually modify the

opinions of mankind almost as profoundly as Luther or Voltaire.[\[82\]](#)

The historian, according to Lecky, should not restrict himself to “a single department of mental phenomena, and to those logical connections which determine the opinions of the severe reasoner.” Instead, he is “obliged to take a wide survey of the intellectual influences of the period he is describing, and to trace [that connection of congruity](#) which has a much greater influence upon the sequence of opinions than logical arguments.”[\[83\]](#) Ideas and events have a symbiotic relationship. Ideas about freedom will help to bring about a free society, while the benefits of a free society will tend to enhance and encourage arguments in its defense.

Any appeal to the “spirit of an age” is likely to be attended with a certain amount of vagueness and ambiguity. J.M. Robertson exploited this problem in his criticism of Lecky. Unfortunately, Robertson’s comments appeared in a little-known book, *Letters on Reasoning* (1902), so it is understandable if an obscure book written by an obscure author is unknown even to readers, including libertarian readers, with a serious interest in this topic.

Lecky, according to Robertson, had used some key words in a loose, inexact manner. Consider Lecky’s argument, quoted above: “Definite arguments are the symptoms and pretexts, but seldom the causes of the change.” Here is what Robertson had to say about this claim:

What Mr. Lecky ought to have said ... is that every great change of belief had been preceded by many smaller changes *of belief*. He writes of “intellectual condition” and “intellectual influences” as if these were not in terms of beliefs. Obviously they are. Instead therefore of saying that pressure of general intellectual influences determines a predisposition which determines beliefs (that is what Mr. Lecky’s loose phrasing comes to), one should say that beliefs on great or central issues are prepared or determined by beliefs on smaller issues.

How, then, are those minor beliefs so altered as to affect major beliefs? We must answer, Either

by simple definite argument or by presentments of fact which evoke and clinch definite argument. To say that definite arguments merely “accelerate the inevitable crisis” is a fresh confusion. There can be no “crisis” until definite arguments are forthcoming. What Mr. Lecky should have said is that definite arguments of an innovating kind on a great or central issue have to be preceded by definite arguments on minor issues if they are to be made acceptable. “Mental habits” are substantially habits of belief.[\[84\]](#)

Later, Robertson repeated his basic point.

Important changes of opinion, or changes in important opinion, whether on the part of individuals or of numbers, are the result of minor changes of opinion, or changes in minor opinions. Not that any one minor change is necessarily primary in a given process: many minor opinions may be revolutionised as the result of a great change; but the point is that no great change of belief occurs save as a result of a number of small mental adaptations—that is, changes of belief.[\[85\]](#)

Thus, as Robertson saw the matter, to attribute dramatic shifts in public opinion to something other than arguments and beliefs, and to attribute such changes instead to some vague, ethereal phenomenon called “intellectual climate” or “spirit of an age,” is the result of sloppy thinking and imprecise speaking. All such phenomena, by whatever name we call them, are ultimately reducible to subjective human beliefs, whether about major or minor issues. Moreover, it is a mistake to contrast, as Lecky did, beliefs that are based on reasoning to beliefs that are based on tradition, or authority, etc. These are all processes of reasoning, however defective that reasoning may be. The real problem is that “the processes of reasoning of most people are incomplete, short-sighted, relatively ‘uncritical,’ uncandid.”[\[86\]](#)

Endnotes

[\[80.\]](#) W.E.H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe* (New York: George Braziller,

1955), I: x. Online
[version: </titles/1666#Lecky_1341.01_1>](/titles/1666#Lecky_1341.01_1).

[81.] Ibid., I: xi. Online:
[version: </titles/1666#Lecky_1341.01_2>](/titles/1666#Lecky_1341.01_2).

[82.] Ibid. Online: [version: </titles/1666#Lecky_1341.01_2>](/titles/1666#Lecky_1341.01_2).

[83.] Ibid., I: xii. Online:
[version: </titles/1666#Lecky_1341.01_3>](/titles/1666#Lecky_1341.01_3).

[84.] f John M. Robertson, *Letters on Reasoning* (London: Watts & Co., 1902), 79.

[85.] Ibid., 80.

[86.] Ibid., 83.

version: *Harmonies* (1850, 1851) and Molinari's *Cours d'Économie politique* (1855).^[88]



Frédéric Bastiat

REVOLUTIONARY MOMENTS AND THE EXPANSION OF PRODUCTION OF PAMPHLETS II: WHEN THE ECONOMISTS TOOK TO THE STREETS

by David M. Hart

My third example of a liberal explosion of "idea production" occurred in Paris between late 1847 and the end of 1849 during the first, more fluid phase of the French Revolution of February 1848. With the successful example of the English Anti-Corn Law League in their minds the French free traders with Frédéric Bastiat at their head tried to replicate that success in France. Bastiat became a full-time activist for the French Free Trade Association, speaking at large public meetings across France (they will be translated and published in volume 6 of Liberty Fund's *Collected Works of Bastiat*) and writing weekly articles for the association's journal *Le Libre-Échange*.^[87] In the Fall of 1847 both Bastiat and Gustave de Molinari got lectureships at the Athénée in Paris where they delivered lectures which they later turned into important and original treatises on economics: Bastiat's *Economic*

Their free-trade and scholarly activities were suspended when revolution broke out in February 1848 and they turned their attention to fighting the new enemy of socialism. In this Bastiat and Molinari were joined by other economists like Charles Coquelin, Alcide Fonteyraud, and Joseph Garnier in setting up popular organizations to confront socialism directly on the streets of Paris. They began by starting a popular magazine, *La République française* (which had 30 daily issues in late February and March 1848), to promote liberal ideas in the new market place for ideas which Parisian streets had become with the collapse of the regime and of censorship.^[89] They competed with literally hundreds of small ephemeral magazines that advocated every idea across the political spectrum. In addition to magazines there were political clubs in most districts of Paris where ideas were publicly debated and from which street marches and demonstrations were organized, especially by the socialists. By some counts some 200 clubs existed in Paris alone. The political economists started their own club, what I call "Club lib" (Club de la liberté du travail [(The Freedom of Working Club)], to counter the socialists head on, but it only lasted a few weeks before socialist threats and violence forced it to close. Molinari

later regretted that the economists had not fought back harder and kept the club open longer.

The political economists started a second magazine in June, *Jacques Bonhomme* (a modern American colloquial translation might be "Joe Six-Pack"), to again take free-market ideas to the streets.^[90] Some of the articles that appeared in this magazine were designed to be reprinted as larger posters which could be pasted to the walls around the streets of Paris in order to promote their cause. It is quite possible that the first draft of Bastiat's famous essay "The State" which appeared in the first issue of *Jacques Bonhomme*, also appeared as a poster on the streets of Paris -- at least until it was torn down by rival socialist groups.^[91] It is also quite possible that Bastiat and Molinari were on the streets handing out copies of their magazine or even sticking their posters to the walls. They both certainly were eyewitnesses to street violence. In both February and June Bastiat left vivid accounts in his correspondence of his witnessing killings of protesters by troops -- he even intervened on one occasion to negotiate a cease-fire with the soldiers so he could organize the removal of the dead and injured from the street barricades.^[92]

In addition to their street activities some of the political economists (Faucher, Wolowski, Bastiat) successfully stood for election in the Constituent Assembly, where they worked against socialist legislation. Another activity was the publication by the Guillaumin publishing firm of dozens of short anti-socialist pamphlets and essays, which were aimed at a popular audience. Guillaumin even produced a separate catalog of the firm's anti-socialist literature in order to advertise the material. Part of this pamphlet war included Bastiat's dozen or so anti-socialist pamphlets like "The State" (September 1848), "Property and Law" (May 1848), and "Justice and Fraternity" (June 1848).^[93] Guillaumin also arranged for the writing and publication of several books of "conversations" between "an economist" and "a worker" or "a socialist" in order to popularize free-market ideas to a broader audience. Molinari wrote his book of conversations *Les Soirées de la rue Saint Lazare* (Evenings on Saint Lazarus Street) as part of this campaign during the spring and summer of 1849;

in it he defended free-market ideas from conservative and socialist criticism as well as advocated the complete privatization and competitive supply of every kind of public good imaginable, including police and defense services.^[94] It was also during 1849 that Bastiat was racing against time to complete his magnum opus *Economic Harmonies* before he died. It too had some revolutionary new economic ideas concerning subjective value theory, exchange, the nature of rent, and Malthusian population theory. This suggests that sometimes revolutionary moments can be a spur to original thinking not just a defense of older notions which have come under attack.

Yet another activity was the decision taken in 1849 by Guillaumin to produce a monumental compendium of free-market ideas which would once and for all destroy socialist economic ideas and which would provide the economic data and theories with which politicians and bureaucrats could devise sounder government economic policies. This was the *Dictionnaire de l'Économie politique* (Dictionary of the Political Economy -- there was only one kind of political economy for the Parisian political economists and that the free market), edited by Charles Coquelin and to which Molinari was a major contributor. It appeared in two very large volumes in 1852-53^[95] (An aside: the dictionary has to rank as one of the greatest publishing achievements of the classical-liberal movement in the 19th century and it is a very great pity is not better known.)

The threat of socialism came to an end with the cancellation of the National Workshops program in May/June 1848; the defeat of the right-to-work clause in the new constitution in September 1848; and the police crackdown on the political clubs and magazines; and the arrest, trial, imprisonment, execution, or deportation of thousands of radical socialists and republicans in 1849. In spite of their efforts, the political economists were not able to defeat socialism intellectually. As Molinari noted "socialisme d'en bas" (socialism from below, i.e. the street) was crushed by the police baton and the National Guard's rifles, but "socialisme d'en haut" (socialism from above, i.e. from within the new Bonapartist bureaucracies) survived

and even flourished.^[96] Some early deaths (Bastiat, Coquelin) and exile (Molinari) depleted the ranks of the political economists in Paris, and this brief, though quite extraordinary liberal moment came to an end.

Again, the questions arise, where did their liberal ideas come from? and what motivated them to take the actions they did in 1848? Their economic ideas clearly came from the Physiocrats (Quesnay and Turgot, whose work Guillaumin published in new, critical editions during the 1840s), Adam Smith, and J.-B. Say's *Treatise* (1803, 1814). Their ideas about class analysis and economic evolution came from the social theory which had been developed by Charles Comte and Charles Dunoyer during the 1820s and 1830s, culminating in Dunoyer's magnum opus *De la Liberté du travail* in 1845 (the economists named their political club after this book).^[97] The trigger to action was the coming to power of a socialist group in early 1848 and their actions were guided by the economic and political ideas which I have just outlined above. These ideas inspired them to become active in starting a free-trade movement and then becoming active on the streets of Paris and in the National Assembly during the revolution.

We can also identify quite clearly some of the key actors in this liberal movement: the intellectual entrepreneur was the publisher and organizer Gilbert-Urbain Guillaumin (1801-1864); the investors in idea production were businessmen and manufacturers like Horace Say (1794-1860), the son of J.-B. Say, and Casimir Cheuvreux who donated money and the use of their homes for functions, and then a number of other writers, speakers, and editors who are too numerous to mention. We also see some of the leading intellectuals "multi-tasking" as academics, journalists, editors, authors, public speakers, politicians, and street activists, as well as others who had more specialized skills and who were active in only one of these activities at any given moment. What the movement lacked however, were many "consumers" of liberal ideas.

The impact of the French political economists on others was slight. The workers marching in the streets were not inspired by Bastiat's and Molinari's free-trade pamphlets

and magazines to swing over to the liberals's side. They did have some impact in the Assembly in checking the socialist National Workshops (Bastiat's work in the Finance Committee of the Assembly was crucial) and blocking the insertion of a right-to-a job clause in the new constitution, but these minor victories were swept aside when Louis Napoléon became first President of the Second Republic, then Prince-President, and finally Emperor of the Second Empire. Napoléon III, as he wished to be known, had a more lasting impact by creating a new kind of bureaucratic interventionist state which Marx termed "Bonapartism".^[98]

In France in 1848, like other European countries, "liberalism from below" appears to have failed on many levels, yet liberalism's salvation may have been a form of "liberalism from above," as one of the economists active in 1848, Michel Chevalier, went on to work within the Bonapartist state and continued to lobby for free trade. This work was rewarded when Napoléon III chose Chevalier to sign a free trade treaty with England in 1860. The person who signed the agreement on behalf of England was none other than Bastiat's mentor and source of inspiration, Richard Cobden.

Endnotes

^[87.] These are now online for the first time at my personal website <<http://davidmhart.com/liberty/FrenchClassicalLiberals/Bastiat/LibreEchange/index.html>>. *Le Libre-Échange. Journal du travail agricole, industriel et commercial. Première année, No. 1: 29 novembre 1846; No. 52: 21 novembre 1847.* Edited by Frédéric Bastiat and Charles Coquelin; and *Le Libre-Échange. Deuxième année, No. 1: 28 novembre 1848; No. 20: 16 avril 1848.*

^[88.] Frédéric Bastiat, *Harmonies économiques* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1850, 1851); Gustave de Molinari, *Cours d'Économie politique*. 1st edition 1855. 2nd revised and enlarged edition (Bruxelles et Leipzig: A Lacroix, Verbroeckoven; Paris: Guillaumin, 1863).

^[89.] *La République française*. Daily journal. Signed: the editors: F. Bastiat, Hippolyte Castille, Molinari. Appeared 26 February to 28 March. 30 issues. Available online at

<<http://davidmhart.com/liberty/FrenchClassicalLiberals/Bastiat/RepubliqueFrancaise1848/index.html>>.

[90.] Jacques Bonhomme, (Paris: 11 June - 13 July, 1848). Online

<<http://davidmhart.com/liberty/FrenchClassicalLiberals/Molinari/JB/index.html>>.

[91.] Bastiat, "The State (draft)" (11-15 June, 1848), in *Collected Works*, vol. 2, pp. 105-6. </titles/2450#lf1573-02_label_195>.]

[92.] See the "Selected Quotations from Bastiat's *Collected Works* vol. 1", The 1848 Revolution" </pages/selected-quotations-from-bastiat-s-collected-works-vol-1#1848>.

[93.] In *Collected Works*, vol. 2 </titles/2450>.

[94.] Molinari, Gustave de, *Les Soirées de la rue Saint-Lazare; entretiens sur les lois économiques et défense de la propriété* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1849). Online version: </titles/1344>. Translation forthcoming from Liberty Fund.

[95.] The aim of the chief editor Coquelin and the publisher Guillaumin was to assemble a summary of the state of knowledge of liberal political economy with articles written by leading economists on thematic topics, biographies of key historical figures, bibliographies of the most important books, and economic and political statistics. The result was a two-volume, nearly 2,000 page, double-columned encyclopedia of political economy which appeared in 1852-53. See, Coquelin, Charles, and Gilbert-Urbain Guillaumin, eds. *Dictionnaire de l'économie politique, contenant l'exposition des principes de la science, l'opinion des écrivains qui ont le plus contribué à sa fondation et à ses progrès, la Bibliographie générale de l'économie politique par noms d'auteurs et par ordre de matières, avec des notices biographiques et une appréciation raisonnée des principaux ouvrages, publié sur la direction de MM. Charles Coquelin et Guillaumin.* (Paris: Librairie de Guillaumin et Cie., 1852-53). 2 vols.

[96.] Molinari, "Obituary of Joseph Garnier," *Journal des Economistes*, Sér. 4, T. 16, No. 46, October 1881, pp. 5-13 Quote p. 9.

[97.] Charles Dunoyer, *De la liberté du travail, ou simple exposé des conditions dans lesquelles les forces humaines s'exercent avec le plus de puissance* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1845).

[98.] Karl Marx, "Der 18te Brumaire des Louis Napoleon" ("The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte"), *Die Revolution* (New York), 1852.

OTHER TACTICAL POSSIBILITIES

by Jason Kuznicki

I tend to agree with this, from Jeffrey Tucker:

People can become wildly passionate about [their preferred tactical approaches], pushing their own view as if there is only one way. If you vote, you are evil; if you don't vote, you are not helping the cause. If you eschew academia, you are not invested in serious ideas; if you are in academia, you have sold out. If you don't protest in the streets, you are unwilling to get your hands dirty; if you do protest in the streets, you are contributing to the problem of mobocracy. And so on. People suppose they have the right way, and it is the only way.

There seems to be some deadweight loss to arguing about tactics too strenuously. Even a less-than-optimally effective tactic may in some sense do some good, while fighting merely about tactics is never going to persuade anyone to become a libertarian. (That is, unless a certain type of outsider *likes* to fight about tactics -- in which case we've been attracting them all along. This could explain a lot, but I digress.)

I'm not sure that there is any one best way to win people's minds. And if there isn't, then a varied approach is probably a good idea.

I hope with mixed emotions that Tucker is also right when he claims that "Enterprise is outpacing the ability of the state of keep up with regulating it." If the claim is true, then it makes my job at the Cato Institute a bit redundant: The people are in for more liberty no matter what we do. We could presumably even switch sides, and it might not matter. Our time might be better spent

preparing for the change, not advocating it. Gardeners don't write letters in favor of spring.

I wholeheartedly agree with this, though, from George H. Smith:

Although still not part of the intellectual mainstream, libertarian ideas are at least regarded as credible enough to be debated in public forums and defended by serious intellectuals. This is an essential first step in changing public opinion. A belief system that lacks credibility will never gain enough traction to become a serious contender in the court of public opinion.

I recall when I was perhaps 13 or 14 -- that is, before my own libertarian conversion -- how I saw a group of protesters in downtown Cincinnati. They were demonstrating in favor of legal marijuana. "These people," I told myself, "are hopeless." As to the facts, I was certain the demonstrators were wrong -- because everything I've ever heard about marijuana was negative. And as to the appearances, well, what could they expect to gain by protesting?

I would never have bet on the protesters' success. And yet their demands are now in the slow, perhaps inexorable process of being met. So what were *they* -- or their close allies -- doing right? One view is that it must have been *something*, even if I have counseled being reasonable, and even if they at the time seemed anything but.

Another view says that the pro-pot demonstrators were like the fleas on the back of an elephant. That the elephant turned toward the water has nothing to do with the fleas' hopes in either direction. This second view has an incredibly attractive cynicism to it, but on closer examination it's ungainly: It conjures into existence unseen social forces with ill-defined attributes, whose only evidence for existence in the first place is the fact that a change has occurred. Theories like these are probably not falsifiable, and we will likely do better to look at the protesters and their struggles.

Or we might look at the opposition. As the editor of a debate journal, I have often found that it can be very difficult to find sincere, competent advocates of certain positions at certain moments in time. This lack is often predictive of the defeat of the side in question. I remarked, perhaps too cattily, at the death of James Q. Wilson, that the War on Drugs had just lost its only real defender. Other supporters of imprisoning people over recreational drug use have generally held, and hold, pro-Drug War positions either through inertia or through the fear of not seeming respectable. The latter rationale is rapidly falling apart. The advocacy groups on the pro-Drug War side have either been hollowed out over time or have never been more than transparent shams. The results may well speak for themselves.

These are huge and interesting questions, but there is a sharp edge to them: We might after all be fleas. Worse, if there exists a single most effective method of convincing the public, *irrespective of the truth of one's claims*, and if that method is yet to be discovered or deployed to its greatest effect, then what we have before us is an arms race -- and one that we may or may not win. The choice may even be a Socratic one, between effective philosophy and beguiling rhetoric. But I doubt it. I like to think that eventually the less wrong side will win. I can hardly think otherwise and keep at the work that I'm in.

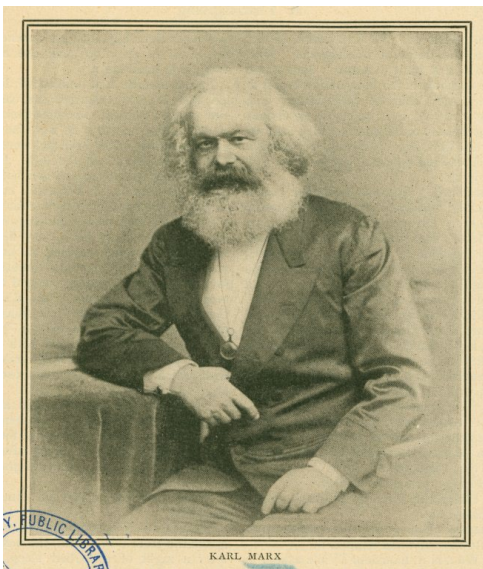
MATERIAL CONDITIONS AND IDEAS AS FACTORS IN THE GROWTH OF LIBERTY

by Stephen Davies

In his initial response to David Hart, Jeff Tucker makes a very important point. This is that liberty in the sense of chosen action and autonomy has increased enormously in the last hundred years, due primarily to technological innovation and enterprise. An exclusive focus on legislation and economic regulation can make us overlook the fact that in their everyday life ordinary

people have far more freedom than was the case a hundred years ago. In particular real liberty has clearly increased for certain groups such as women and sexual or ethnic minorities and rhetoric that portrays the last hundred and fifty years as being a period of sustained decline in liberty is going to strike many people from those groups, not to mention others, as being both wrong headed and bizarre. This point was made very effectively recently by David Boaz of the Cato Institute, in a post that sparked off a considerable debate.^[99]

To expand Jeff's point, what we should not forget is the way that material changes such as the development of new technologies and the alterations in the material conditions of life that they bring about, lead to both an increase in personal choice and autonomy and a consequent alteration in thinking, perceptions and understanding of the world. Significantly it is not simply technology that has or can have these kinds of effects. Changes in the way activities are organized and the way that social interactions are structured can also have major effects even in the absence of material changes. The changes can be liberty enhancing in the way that Jeff describes. In addition they can make organization and cooperation easier and make the transmission and spread of ideas easier, with possible benefits for the spread of liberal ideas, as Jim Powell and David Hart both point out.



Karl Marx

This sounds rather like Marx's way of thinking but there were of course two problems with that. The practical one was that assuming that it was material changes and changes in the structure of production that led to intellectual, social, and political change could lead to a kind of fatalism in which there was no point in activism, as you might as well just let material historical evolution take its course. This was the view, effectively, of orthodox Marxists such as Kautsky, and Edouard Bernstein and Lenin both pointed out the problems with this in both theory and reality (from very different perspectives of course).^[100]

The more serious problem of course is that this makes ideas an epiphenomenon and denies them autonomy. Historical research shows that this is simply untrue. What ideas, produced autonomously by scholars and disseminated by the second hand dealers in ideas, do is this. They provide the intellectual tool kit by which people make sense of and understand the changes going on around them, decide which aspects of this they like and which they do not and also then produce agendas to change the world in one direction or another. This means that there is actually a two-way causal relationship in which ideas are articulated in response to physical change but then shape how that change is understood and then in turn lead to purposive action that leads to further changes or directs the spontaneous changes in one direction rather than another.

Sometimes this works in favour of liberty but on other occasions it works in the other direction. In addition of course what frequently happens is that there is a clash of views over how to understand and evaluate what is happening and then over the direction in which people should consciously seek to change institutions and rules or forms of governance. It is at that point that we may speak of a 'battle of ideas'. For example, in the last third of the nineteenth century something happened that was entirely unexpected and unforeseen, by either classical liberals or socialists (particularly the Marxist variety). This was the appearance of the modern multi-divisional business corporation and alongside that of mass production in large plants and mass marketing. (Contrary

to popular belief small workshop production was still dominant as late as the 1860s on both sides of the Atlantic – textiles were exceptional).[101]

Unfortunately there was a major failure on the part of classical liberals in explaining what was going on and responding effectively. What won the day was the idea that these changes showed that it was possible to organize large scale social activity in a conscious and directed way through the practice of scientific management by an elite of experts. The state and economy that the Bolsheviks constructed after the mid-1920s was essentially an attempt to run Soviet life as a single monopoly corporation. Today professional managerialism and the idea that really smart people can run the world smoothly if only they are left in charge is still the dominant idea. At the same time the new experience of working in large plants, in a collective activity, and of mass consumption, created a new kind of popular consciousness and culture and often undermined older ideas of personal autonomy and independence. [102]

So the question raised by Jeff Tucker and also by George Smith in his discussion of Leslie Stephen is that of the relation between innovation and material change, popular consciousness and the zeitgeist that Stephen was talking about. This is where we should think of the role of people who are not simply intellectuals but cultural and intellectual entrepreneurs who create narratives and analyses that make sense of what is happening, fit it into a more general understanding, and generate ideas about how the world and human life might be changed for the better. People such as Malcolm Gladwell, Jane Jacobs, and Nassim Nicholas Taleb would be examples.[103] What Jeff argues in many of his writings, and I have also argued is that there are many changes going on now that are clearly liberty enhancing, in the way that the changes at the end of the nineteenth century proved not to be. The development for example of peer to peer networking and distribution is a case in point. The challenge is to make sense of these phenomena and to suggest ways in which they can be used in practical ways and in addition to put forward ideas of how these can

lead to a positive vision of the future and of ways to realize this.

Endnotes

[99.] David Boaz, "Up from Slavery: There's no such thing as a golden age of lost liberty", *Reason*, April 6, 2010 <<https://reason.com/archives/2010/04/06/up-from-slavery>> and the 618 responses it provoked. See also the rejoinder by Jacob Hornberger, "Up from Serfdom: How to restore lost liberties while building on the positive strides America has made since 1776", *Reason*, April 9, 2010 <<https://reason.com/archives/2010/04/09/up-from-serfdom>>.

[100.] For this see Sheri Berman, *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[101.] The definitive account of this is of course the trilogy of works by Alfred D. Chandler: *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1993); *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the Industrial Enterprise* (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2013 [1962]); and *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1994).

[102.] The major response by late-19th-century libertarians was to suggest various forms of profit-sharing as an alternative to wage employment and to advocate the dissolution or replacement of employment relations in industrial enterprise. This did not catch on, partly because professional economists did not take it seriously. See Edward Bristow, *Individualism versus Socialism in Britain, 1880-1914*. (New York: Garland Press, 1987), particularly pp. 229-306. See also Jihang Park, *Profit Sharing and Industrial Co-Partnership in British Industry, 1880-1920: Class Conflict or Class Collaboration?* (New York: Garland Press, 1987).

[103.] Taleb in particular is putting forward a way of understanding the world and current developments that leads to skepticism about power and government, as well as radical libertarian ideas about how to change the world, such as suggesting that city-states and confederations of them are preferable to territorial nation-states. See

Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder* (New York: Random House, 2014).

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

by George H. Smith

In this comment I wish to discuss not how libertarians can change public opinion per se but how we should frame some of our arguments. This pertains to an important debate among 19th-century liberals, namely, whether freedom depends for its advance primarily on the progress of knowledge, especially in economics, or whether an improvement of moral sentiments is more fundamental. I subscribe to the latter position; unless sufficient numbers of people have a due regard for the *moral autonomy* of individuals, the diffusion of knowledge about economics will have relatively little effect.

It is clear that antislavery crusades were grounded in moral arguments, especially the right of self-ownership, even though economic arguments played a role as well. Even libertarian crusades that seemed economic in character, such as the campaign against the English Corn Laws, had strong moral components, as when free-market types emphasized how tariffs exploited the middle and lower classes for the benefit of the landed aristocracy. And Adam Smith did not hesitate to emphasize the moral injustice of apprenticeship laws. As he wrote in *The Wealth of Nations*:

[The property which every man has in his own labour](#), as it is the original foundation of all other property, so it is the most sacred and inviolable. The patrimony of a poor man lies in the strength and dexterity of his hands; and to hinder him from employing this strength and dexterity in what manner he thinks proper without injury to his neighbor, is a plain violation of this most sacred property. It is a manifest encroachment upon the just liberty both of the workman, and of those who might be disposed to employ him. As it hinders the

one from working at what he thinks proper, so it hinders the others from employing whom they think proper. To judge whether he is fit to be employed, may surely be trusted to the discretion of the employers whose interest it so much concerns. The affected anxiety of the law-giver lest they should employ an improper person, is evidently as impertinent as it is absurd.[\[104\]](#)

Economic arguments are among the most powerful weapons available to libertarians, but close attention should be paid to the context in which these arguments occur. Frequently the libertarian will try to show how the free market would solve various social problems, without asking whether, or in what sense, a problem may be said to exist in the first place. This brings me to an important strategic principle: *He who determines what constitutes a "social problem" will also determine what qualifies as a "solution."* More often than not, social problems are defined in such a way that nothing but governmental intervention will count as a solution. This is nowhere more evident than in what economists call the "public goods problem."

According to the standard account found in textbooks on microeconomics, a "public good" is definable by two objective characteristics of the good itself: first, it must be *nonrival in consumption*, which means that consumption by one person does not diminish the quantity consumed by anyone else. The second characteristic is *nonexclusion*, which means that it is impossible or too costly to confine the benefits of the good to those who pay for it.

The typical example of a public good is national defense, because it protects everyone simultaneously and cannot be limited only to those who pay for it. Those who benefit from a public good without paying for it are known as "free riders." These free riders, it should be noted, are not irrational people. On the contrary, free riding is said to be "rational" when public goods are involved. According to many economists, a public good *should* be produced, in the sense that everyone would benefit from it. Yet it will *not* be produced in the free market, because every rational

calculator will prefer a free ride. Therefore, neither the economist nor the consumer is to blame for this supposed "problem"; rather, *it is the market that has failed*. Of course, having defined the "problem" in this manner, any market "solution" is disqualified beforehand. Thus does government enter center-stage, able and willing to solve the problem of market failure.

Although the public-goods argument is typically said to be value-free, it actually reduces to the claim that the market will not produce what I (or others) think it *should* produce, so we *ought* to abandon the outcome of real market decisions and call instead on the nonmarket decisions of government. Through coercive taxation, government will enable consumers to enjoy a product that we would gladly have paid for voluntarily if only our rational decisions (to be free riders) had not prevented us from satisfying our rational preferences (for public goods).

The concept of a public good, as traditionally employed, is a muddy brew of ill-defined terms and value judgments. A conclusion about alleged market failures, which is where the public-goods argument has been designed to take us, shares these flaws while adding another one to the list, viz., the anthropomorphic fallacy. The concept of "failure" presupposes a purposeful action that does not produce the desired result. To conceive of market failure in literal terms, we must anthropomorphize the market, transforming it from a *process* into a *purposeful being* with desires and goals that it strives, unsuccessfully, to fulfill. It is as if the market were a flesh-and-blood person with rational preferences who, huffing and puffing, undertakes a task for which it is constitutionally unfit. In truth, of course, the "market" is nothing but a collective abstraction that denotes the innumerable economic decisions of singular human beings. The market can neither achieve, nor fail to achieve, anything.

The anthropomorphic metaphor occurs in the old joke about how many libertarians it takes to screw in a light bulb: *none; the market will take care of it*. Now, this metaphorical usage is sometimes appropriate, within limits. It indicates, first, that consumer preferences will

be most efficiently satisfied in a free market; and, second, that, owing to multitudinous variables, we cannot be very specific about market outcomes. However, when explaining how "the market" will "solve" a social problem, we should guard against inappropriate applications of this metaphor. The correct response may be to attack the arbitrary nature of the supposed problem, for if that "problem" goes unchallenged, libertarian "solutions" will be often defined out of existence in advance.

In my judgment, the most egregious contemporary example of how the term "problem" is misused is the so-called "drug problem" in America today. Stripped to its bare essentials, this means that many Americans like to use drugs and that many other Americans don't like their behavior. The majority, when it disapproves of a minority, is likely to classify the behavior of that minority as a "social problem," thereby opening the door for a governmental "solution."



Nineteenth-century American nativists didn't like Catholicism, so they postulated an "immigrant problem" or an "Irish problem" and then campaigned for a "solution" in the form of common schools that would "Christianize the Catholics." Obviously, it would have been wrong, not to say absurd, for a libertarian to argue that the market would take care of the "Catholic problem" on its own without government schools. What would we think of an economic argument that said, in effect: "A free market in education and religion will tend to reduce the demand for Catholicism and thereby solve the Catholic problem automatically"? Clearly, the libertarian, rather than offer this kind of "market solution," should simply deny the very existence of a

"Catholic problem," attributing to it no meaning other than the personal preference of some Protestants.

Yet some libertarians respond to the "drug problem" in a similar manner. They tell us how the market will "solve" the "drug problem," or at least make it less severe. This, as I said, is similar to the response given earlier to the "Catholic problem," and it is equally problematic. It is mistaken because the market does not determine preferences; it merely reflects them. If there is a demand for drugs, then a free market will fulfill that demand in the most efficient manner possible.

This is why I regard as disingenuous the standard "market solution" for the "drug problem." Some libertarians do not want to associate themselves with unpopular minorities or be perceived as defending their behavior, so they swallow the mythical "drug problem" and propose an equally mythical "market solution." What they should do, of course, is to deny the legitimacy of the problem itself—or at least be crystal clear about exactly what that alleged problem means.

I do not wish to be understood as minimizing the importance of economic arguments in presenting the case for individual freedom. But I do wish to suggest that libertarians should analyze "social problems" more carefully than they often do. We should not accept a "social problem" at face value and then search for a "market solution." More often than not, such problems will turn out to be nothing more than the value-laden constructs of people who disapprove of how others live their lives.

Endnotes

[104.] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R.H. Campbell and A.S. Skinner (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Classics, 1981), I:138. Online version: Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations by Adam Smith, edited with an Introduction, Notes, Marginal Summary and an Enlarged Index by Edwin Cannan* (London: Methuen, 1904). Vol. 1. Book I. Chapter X: Of Wages and Profit in the Different Employments of Labour and Stock.

Part II: Inequalities occasioned by the Policy of Europe
</titles/237#Smith_0206-01_431>.

THE CHANGING COSTS OF DEFENDING ONE'S CORE BELIEFS

by David M. Hart

These thoughts are in response to some of the interesting things George Smith, Jason Kuznicki, and Peter Mentzel have said concerning why people change their ideas and how. I would like to introduce a distinction between the "core beliefs" and "noncore beliefs" which make up a person's or a society's belief structure, as well as discuss the changing relative costs of getting people to think differently, and the role that systemic crises might play in this process.

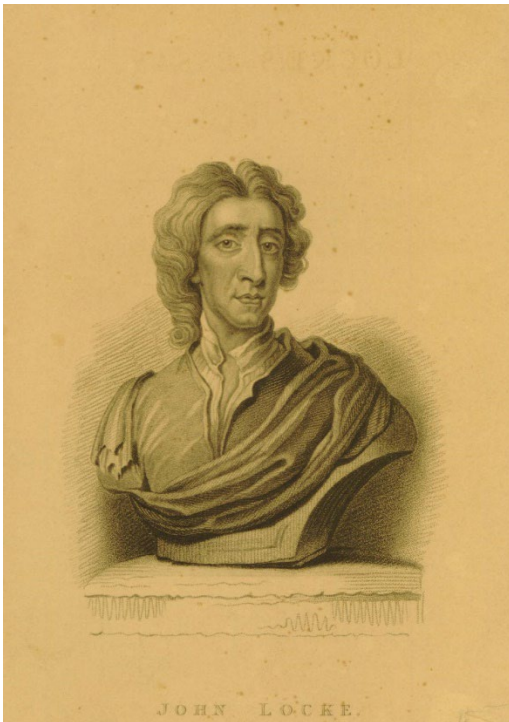
By "core belief" (or, as George Smith points out, what J.M. Robertson called "major beliefs"), I mean any idea which is fundamental to a person's or a society's *Weltanschauung*, or overall system of belief. For a traditional Catholic or a fundamentalist Protestant a core belief is the idea that marriage must be between a man and women. For a Keynesian it is the idea that "aggregate demand" exists and that when it falls below a certain level it is the right and duty of the government or central bank to manipulate the interest rate and the supply of money to "stimulate" it back up to an acceptable level. To give up this belief would mean giving up their entire worldview, and this they will not do easily. In fact, they would spend considerable resources defending this view and opposing any challenge to it.

By "noncore beliefs" (or what Robertson called "minor beliefs"), I mean beliefs which do not define a person or a society. As such, they are less important to you and you might be interested in discussing them with others, listening to challenges to their truth or efficacy, and even giving up belief in them if your preferences were to change or if you could be bought off in reaching a

compromise. An example of this is the recent growing acceptance of same-sex marriage. For an increasing number of younger people the idea of marriage as only between a man and a woman is noncore, rather than a core, belief. Thus they are willing to entertain the idea that laws should be changed to allow state recognition of same-sex marriages. What seemed impossible 50 years ago (because the vast majority of Americans regarded "traditional" marriage as a core Christian belief) is now, through a process of generational and demographic change, becoming a reality.

Some historical examples of core beliefs which have changed over time relate to slavery, the divine right of kings, and sound money (among Germans).

First, under the influence of the Enlightenment, many Europeans in the late-18th and early-19th centuries gave up their traditional ideas that slavery was both just and necessary for inferior races. In a relatively short time (historically speaking) this core belief evaporated; the cost of changing people's minds over the issue declined; and the slave trade, then slavery itself, was abolished in many places (with the exception of America).



John Locke

Second, in John Locke's time the belief in the divine right of kings was a core belief for most Europeans. See, for example, Locke's debate with Filmer in the *Two Treatises of Government* (1688).^[105] Again, as a result of the Enlightenment and the American and French revolutions, this core belief was shattered and was replaced by a new core belief in the legitimacy of democratic government.

Third, as a result of the hyperinflation of 1922 and the defeats of 1918 and 1945, the German people today have a hostility to loose-money policies and war which is not shared to the same degree in other developed countries. Their core beliefs in the right of central banks to manipulate the money supply and the right of the government to engage in frequent wars (or engage in "liberal interventionism") have largely evaporated and have been replaced by beliefs in sound money and minding one's own business in foreign affairs.

The implications of seeing ideas and belief structures in this light are the following:

1. It is costly to change people's core beliefs because they are essential to those peoples' sense of who they are.
2. It is less costly to change people's noncore beliefs or at least to persuade them to compromise or modify them somewhat in the face of growing opposition.
3. Core beliefs do change but only slowly and at high cost. It might be a demographic matter, as younger people with different core beliefs begin to outnumber the older generation with a different set of core beliefs; or it might be the result of crises such as hyperinflation, defeat in war, or even revolution. The possibility of any intellectual movement, whether Marxist or classical liberal, being able to achieve change through the "mass conversion" of people from one set of core beliefs to another set is extremely unlikely.
4. It is less costly to work at gradually changing people's noncore beliefs, in other words, fighting the intellectual battles on the margin.

5. Any intellectual movement still needs a growing number of people who share its core beliefs if it is to grow and prosper.

Endnotes

[105.] See the debate about the Divine Right of Kings between Sir Robert Filmer, Algernon Sidney, John Locke, and James Tyrrell <[/collections/80](#)> and the commentary and analysis by Eric Mack, "James Tyrrell on Authority and Liberty" <[/pages/james-tyrrell-on-authority-and-liberty](#)>; Eric Mack, "Eric Mack, An Introduction to the Political Thought of John Locke" <[/pages/eric-mack-an-introduction-to-the-political-thought-of-john-locke](#)>; and Thomas G. West, "Sidney, Filmer & Locke on Monarchical Power" <[/pages/sidney-filmer-locke-on-monarchical-power](#)>.

THE COST OF REPRODUCING IDEAS HAS FALLEN FOR EVERYONE

by David M. Hart

Jeffrey Tucker's comments raise the question of whether the historical examples I drew upon are relevant for the brave new world opened up by the Internet. My thoughts about the structure of production of ideas were based upon the empirical observation of several historical examples drawn mainly from the 18th and 19th centuries and in postwar America and England. It was a functional analysis in that I identified several key functions/activities which needed to be undertaken if ideas (of any kind) were to be created, transmitted to others, and put into effect. From this study one should then ask whether all these activities must be present if change is to be brought about. Can we explain the failure of past attempts to change society by the absence or incomplete development of any of these stages? My study also included the importance of the division of labor in the production of ideas, as in any other kind of production, ranging from investors with long-term interests, entrepreneurs of ideas who can see an unmet

market need and who can assemble all the people with different sets of skills to work together harmoniously, as well as a sales force that can sell the product to the ultimate consumers.

In these historical cases, especially in the years immediately following World War II, liberal-minded people were in short supply, funding was limited, and the intellectual opposition faced by classical liberals was enormous. The question faced by any investor or entrepreneur who wished to bring his goods to market (whether physical goods or ideas) was how to allocate scarce and costly resources to their best use. Where should we start? Can we find a niche for our particular product? How can we get consumers of ideas interested in our product? Will they "buy it"?

Jeff argues that what is different now in the Internet age is the "costlessness" of the reproduction of ideas. This is indeed true -- or rather the price has dropped considerably; it is still not costless. But it is true for all our competitors as well. We still observe that classical-liberal ideas are scarce compared to all the non-liberal ideas out there, so I would argue that the relative scarcity of classical-liberal ideas remains about the same. We are constantly faced with the danger of being crowded out in the marketplace of ideas. The problem is still: how do we get our ideas heard above the din made by all the other hawkers of ideas in the market? This is the perennial question that needs answering. Perhaps in our time, when we have numerous bodies/groups active in the higher and middle stages of the structure of production of ideas, the role of marketeers and salespeople is much greater than ever before.

Steve Davies makes a similar remark about how "the development of new technologies and the alterations in the material conditions of life that they bring about lead to both an increase in personal choice and autonomy and a consequent alteration in thinking, perceptions, and understanding of the world." The point is well taken, but the issue remains how best to channel those newly unleashed energies in an explicitly pro-liberty direction. Both Jeff and Steve seem to be suggesting that it is enough to just unleash these new creative energies and

the problem of liberty will take care of itself. This seems to me to be a variant of Marshall McLuhan's expression that "the medium is the message," or in this case, "Liberty is a product of the medium."[\[106\]](#)

Endnotes

[\[106.\]](#) Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*, coordinated by Jerome Agel (New York: Random House, 1967).

CHANGING CORE BELIEFS TAKES A LONG TIME

by Peter Mentzel

The comments by George Smith on Lecky and Robertson, and Steve Davies's interesting reflections on the connections between ideas and social change, have helped me greatly in my thinking about how ideas spread. I want to try to synthesize some of what has been said and then pose a couple of new hypotheses.

It seems to me that George's fascinating exploration of Stephen, Lecky, and Robertson clarify some of the basic points that David Hart has been sketching. If I understand George correctly, the process of ideational change begins with what we have been calling "first-order thinkers," in Stephen's example, people like Bacon, Descartes, and Locke. Their ideas gradually filter into society and influence public opinion, which eventually works to change general attitudes and economic and social policies.

So far so good, but George, drawing on Robertson, makes an important argument at this point. Changes of belief, in matters both "major" and "minor" (corresponding, I think, to David Hart's distinction between "core" and "noncore" beliefs), come about as a result of reasoning. This is crucial, I think, because it gives us a mechanism, thus far lacking in our discussion, for how ideas are actually spread, namely, through reasoned argument. In this formulation, concepts like *Zeitgeist* become not the producers of public opinion but their effects. If this description of how ideas are

spread is accurate, it is at the same time exciting and daunting. It is exciting because it means that, with the proper sorts of arguments, we can convince people of the truth of our ideas. It is daunting because, as Robertson's quote hints, most people do not want to put forth the necessary effort to consider and reason through new ideas, especially if these run counter to popular opinion.

The other question suggested by this line of reasoning is the length of time it takes for ideas to filter through society, become the subjects of debates and arguments, and eventually change public opinion. David Hart and I have been talking about this offline (I have the advantage of working in the same building as he does), and I've come to a couple of tentative hypotheses on the subject.

First, it seems like it takes a very, very long time for abstract "first-order" ideas to make their way into public opinion. Smith and Ricardo, for example, were writing about the importance of free trade and free markets during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, but it took until the 1840s for such ideas to become more or less commonplace. Even then, free-trade policies were (and have continued to be) under relentless attack. If we want to take the date of the abolition of the Corn Laws (1846) as an indication of the victory of free-trade ideas, we can say that from the publication of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, it took 70 years for free-trade ideas to see their first significant victory.



Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Another interesting example of a change in people's core beliefs (or major beliefs) involves the abolition of slavery. It is difficult to pin down a seminal text or thinker to mark this movement's beginning. For centuries in Europe the church and secular authorities had issued various edicts and decrees to regulate or restrict slavery, but the abolitionist movement, as it developed in the 18th and especially the 19th, centuries clearly drew on the natural-rights tradition coming out of the Enlightenment. For convenience, we might take Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1762), with its explicit antislavery arguments, as a kind of foundational abolitionist text. In this case the ideas seem to have spread into public opinion somewhat more quickly, at least initially. Some of the new states in the American republic abolished or otherwise restricted slavery shortly after independence from the British Empire. France abolished slavery in 1794 (though it was reintroduced by Napoleon a few years later. It was finally abolished in 1848). Great Britain declared the slave trade illegal in 1807 and abolished slavery throughout the empire in 1833. In the United States slavery was finally outlawed by the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1865, and it was abolished in Brazil in 1888. If we want to use the abolition of slavery in the British Empire as a kind of benchmark for the generalization of antislavery

sentiment in European popular opinion, then the span was 72 years

A final example of the spread of ideas traceable from a single philosophical work to a popular belief might be Marxian socialism. While we might with some confidence date the origin of this belief to the publication in 1848 of *The Communist Manifesto*, picking a date when these ideas became a major influence on public opinion is trickier. The victory of the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 seems like a satisfactory, if problematic, event to mark a victory of the ideas of Marx and Engels, even if the degree to which this victory was based on a change of popular opinion is open to question. Again, we have a span of seven decades.

What this suggests is that it takes a long time for popular opinion, or perhaps more important, people's core beliefs to be changed by first-order ideas. It is also interesting that 70 years roughly corresponds to an average human lifespan. This might suggest that major beliefs are so deeply held that people in fact almost never change them, and that seismic shifts in popular opinion are necessarily (not just coincidentally) linked to generational changes.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AND OTHER SPONTANEOUS ACTS OF LIBERTY

by David M. Hart

Jeff Tucker also raises an interesting point I did not address, namely, the importance of spontaneous activity of ordinary people who engage in acts of civil disobedience, such as ignoring prohibitionist drug laws and other difficult-to-enforce and much-disliked laws and regulations. (Another example is cigarette smuggling to avoid heavy state taxes.) These are cases where people's "direct action" (to use a leftist trade union term) is ahead of the intellectuals and where the latter have to play catch-up if they are to be relevant.

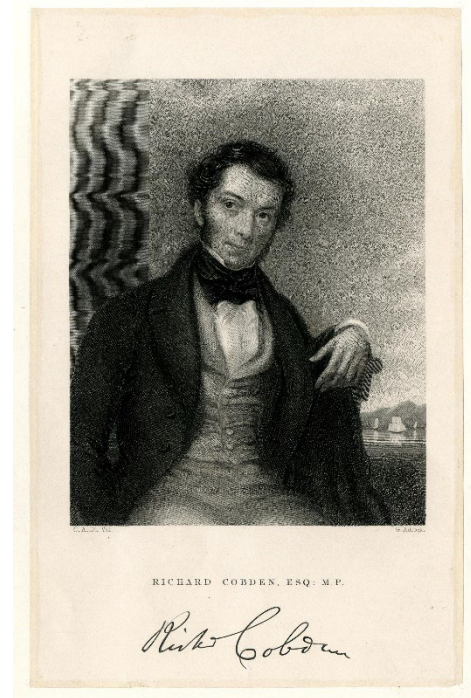
The problem with such "spontaneous acts of liberty" is that although people are legitimately attempting to

exercise their rights to buy, sell, and consume whatever they like in a nonviolent manner, those acts are usually not linked to the broader issues involved, namely, property rights and free trade. The task of Rothbard's cadres would be to identify in an entrepreneurial manner the possible emergence of these "spontaneous acts of liberty," to give them political and intellectual support, and to make use of them to spread the broader message about liberty and the free market to those involved. The danger is that, instead of winning complete liberty, these "revolts" would be temporarily assuaged, or bought off, through state concessions, say, by partial legalization, and then brought under the normal tax and regulatory regime.

In my view, "spontaneous acts of liberty" will not be successful in the longer run unless they are linked to other factors which are required to bring about lasting change. I think we can identify four factors which can be used to put pressure on governments and vested interests to get them to consider change in a pro-liberty reaction; civil disobedience plays and has played an important part in this process. They are the following:

1. an ideological challenge
2. a political challenge
3. an economic challenge
4. an insurrectionary or civil-disobedience challenge

The two historical examples I want to look at in this context are Cobden's Anti-Corn Law League, where civil disobedience was never part of their strategy for change, yet they were able to achieve their political goals, and the abolitionist movement in the United States, where acts of civil disobedience were substantial, but where the political result of emancipation was only achieved after a bloody war.



Richard Cobden

First, Cobden's Anti-Corn Law League was a single-issue movement that did not try to link free trade to broader philosophical or political principles, such as the right of the individual to own property and dispose of it as he saw fit, the right of all property owners to vote, the role protectionism played in supporting the power of aristocratic landowners, and so on. Such linkage might have frightened off potential conservative supporters. Ideologically, the Leaguers took advantage of the spread of Smithian ideas on free trade, which were gaining ground among the classical economists and certain sectors of the bureaucracy. The Leaguers to my knowledge did not encourage people to disobey the law by engaging in the smuggling of grain in order to undermine the tariff laws and put economic pressure on protected land owners. Unlike the women's movement in the late-19th century, we do not see radical free traders chaining themselves to grain warehouses to provoke the police into arresting them and using court trials to get publicity. Instead, they focused on a peaceful propaganda campaign aimed at middle-class voters and consumers by using the high price of food for ordinary people to make its point, with effective use of images such as "the big loaf" (the result of free trade in grain) and "the small

loaf" (the result of protectionism). They were also effective at putting pressure on elected politicians through the collection of signatures. Once the League had achieved its goal of repealing the Corn Laws (gradually over a three-year period 1846-49) it wound up its political business and disappeared.

One wonders what might have happened if a clique of radical free traders had tried to form their own group to lobby for free trade by using more "direct action" than the staid and middle-class Leaguers did. Since smuggling was an ancient tradition in England because of its long coastline and the state's heavy reliance on excise taxes for funds, they could have tapped into this popular, or folk, tradition of civil disobedience to the customs officials. Note that smuggling was also very much a part of early America, as Peter Andreas has documented in *Smuggler Nation* (2013). [\[107\]](#) The danger of course, is that by becoming more threatening politically and economically, they might have alienated the more moderate and conservative supporters they needed to win repeal of the Corn Laws. Unfortunately, we will never know the result of this counterfactual speculation. On the other hand, we do have the example of the more radical Chartist movement, which was active at the same time as the Anti-Corn Law League, but its success was limited and it faded away after 1848.

My second example is the American abolitionist movement before the Civil War. Ideologically, Frederick Douglass explicitly and repeatedly linked the abolition of slavery to the broader philosophical and political principle of self-ownership and the expression of natural rights as enunciated in the Enlightenment and the Declaration of Independence. The best example of this is his marvelous and radical July 4, 1852, "Oration" to a group of ladies in Rochester, N.Y. [\[108\]](#) His linking of the specific (the injustice of black slavery) to the general (the principles of the Declaration of Independence) may well have worried the good Christian ladies of Rochester, along with other potential supporters of gradual emancipation. Politically it was a hard slog to get abolitionist platforms adopted by the main political parties, and abolitionists always had the stigma of being a

bit too much of a fringe movement to be acceptable. In addition, the abolitionists always had to contend with strong sectional interests.

Economically, the American abolitionists did not use the British abolitionists' strategy of putting pressure on Caribbean sugar producers by boycotting "slave sugar." Replicating this in America was difficult because the goods made by slave-labor (cotton and tobacco) were produced within the country and supported a large number of dependent shipping and manufacturing interests, whereas the British sugar producers lived in a far-flung island colony.

Acts of civil disobedience were widespread, both by the slaves themselves and by some supporters of abolitionism. Slaves owners always feared slave revolts (note Nat Turner's slave rebellion of 1831), and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 showed the increasing internal danger and economic cost of runaway slaves. Jeffrey Rogers Hummel has shown how the slave owners attempted to socialize the cost of preventing escapes or capturing runaway slaves by forcing all American taxpayers to pay the expense and what a burden this was on the American economy. [\[109\]](#) There was also a long history of runaway slaves forming their own free "maroon societies" beyond the reach of the slave owners in Florida, Brazil, and elsewhere. [\[110\]](#) In the late 18th and early 19th centuries the slaves ran away to the south to join these new societies. As the 19th century wore on and routes to the south were closed off, they increasingly fled to British Canada. Supporters of the Underground Railroad participated in acts of civil disobedience by helping the slaves escape from slave America. Some libertarians like Lysander Spooner even gave support to the more radical groups that wanted to foment greater "direct action" on the part of the slaves by supplying guerrilla slave bands with arms so they could confront the slave owners directly. [\[111\]](#) But this strategy alienated most Americans and the consequences were harsh if the uprising failed and the white supporters were caught.

It gradually became clear that a political solution to slavery would be hard to achieve because of the strong regional forces at work in the American federation and

the economic importance of slave production, which was concentrated within one sector of the country. Also, it became evident that uncoordinated acts of civil disobedience like running away or fomenting slave uprisings were either ineffectual or doomed to failure.

In retrospect, one wonders how the abolitionists might have acted differently. Perhaps a better-planned campaign which linked all four different ways power can be challenged -- ideologically, politically, economically, and by acts of civil disobedience -- was required. But this would need a lot of luck and, I would say, the existence of a group of gifted "political and ideological entrepreneurs" as well -- a rather tall order.

Gene Sharp has done much to explore the possibilities of civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance.^[112] Perhaps others might like to discuss this in future posts.

Endnotes

^[107.] Peter Andreas, *Smuggler Nation: How Illicit Trade Made America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

^[108.] Frederick Douglass, *Oration, delivered in Corinthian Hall, Rochester. July 4th, 1852. Published by Request* (Rochester: Lee, Mann and Co., 1852). On the Oration see James A. Colaiaco, *Frederick Douglass and the Fourth of July* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) and Nicholas Buccola, *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass: In Pursuit of American Liberty* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

^[109.] Jeffrey Rogers Hummel, *Emancipating Slaves, Enslaving Free Men: A History of the American Civil War*. Foreword by John Majewski (Chicago: Open Court, 2nd ed. 2013).

^[110.] *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*, edited, with a new preface, by Richard Price (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

^[111.] Lysander Spooner, *A Defence for Fugitive Slaves, against the Acts of Congress of February 12, 1793, and September 18, 1850* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1850). <[titles/2225](#)>; and *A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery, and To the Non-*

Slaveholders of the South (place and publisher unknown, 1858). <[titles/2229](#)>.

^[112.] Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. Introduction by Thomas C. Schelling. Prepared under the auspices of Harvard University's Center for International Affairs. (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973). Vol. 1 *Power and Struggle*, vol. 2 *The Methods of Nonviolent Action*, vol. 3 *Dynamics of Nonviolent Action*; Gene Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist, with Essays on Ethics and Politics*, Introduction by Coretta Scott King. (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1979); Gene Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation* (East Boston, MA: The Albert Einstein Institution, 2002, 4th ed. 2010).

WHY DID SO MANY PEOPLE TURN AWAY FROM CLASSICAL-LIBERAL IDEAS DURING THE 19TH CENTURY?

by Jim Powell

For multitudes of ordinary people, the period between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the outbreak of World War I were the best years ever. This was the most peaceful period since the Roman Peace almost 2,000 years earlier. There were no general wars. Chattel slavery was abolished in the Western Hemisphere. Many countries adopted constitutions, and more people gained the right to vote. The movement to achieve equal rights for women, including property rights as well as the right to vote, got underway and scored big victories in the next century. Living standards in the western world took off after some 2,000 years without sustained economic progress. In most places, taxes were probably not more than 10 percent. The development of science began to conquer dreaded diseases, and increasingly the practice of medicine did more good than harm.

Yet during the mid-19th century more and more people turned away from ideologies responsible for these as

well as other breakthroughs for liberty that were truly astounding.

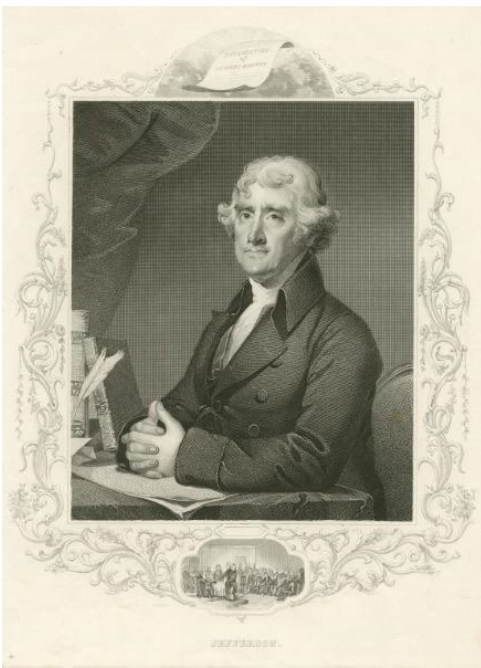
Here are three factors that might help to explain why people turned away from liberty:

1. *People abandoned the natural-rights philosophy.*

That philosophy had established that rights don't come from government and that therefore there are strict limits on what government could legitimately do. The natural-rights philosophy also infused the freedom philosophy with a crucial moral dimension that had a great deal to do with its appeal.

As it fell out of fashion during the 19th century, a number of people rediscovered it when they found they could not make a legal or constitutional argument for liberty.

William Lloyd Garrison, who found he couldn't make a constitutional argument for abolishing American slavery, frequently quoted from the summary of the natural rights philosophy in the Declaration of Independence, even though Garrison despised Jefferson for owning slaves.



Thomas Jefferson

Elizabeth Cady Stanton paraphrased this summary in her Declaration of Rights and Sentiments when she

launched the movement to achieve equal rights for women in 1848.

After Jefferson, perhaps the most influential defender of natural rights was Henry David Thoreau; “Civil Disobedience” (1849) influenced people as far afield as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. King couldn't make a legal argument against compulsory racial segregation, since it was supported by southern state laws, so he too often quoted from the Declaration of Independence.

What happened to the natural-rights philosophy? Perhaps the biggest blows came from the Utilitarians, especially Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. My sense is they played a crucial role promoting a couple of corrosive ideas.

First, if legal institutions and accumulations of laws are reformed, they can become the most logical sources of rights – in other words, positive law. Why look anywhere else to find out what our rights are?

Second, if everybody gets the vote, then the government is us, so it becomes our friend. It's no longer a threat to liberty as it was when there were kings almost everywhere. Extending the franchise is the single most effective policy for protecting liberty. Who needs a constitution?

2. *Multitudes embraced nationalism.*

Nationalism encouraged people to believe that their nationality -- language, culture, religion, and so on -- was better than other people's nationalities. There was an urgency to have one's nationality promoted and defended by a charismatic leader in a powerful state everybody could be proud of.

Many times the cause of classical liberalism became mixed up with nationalism, especially when there was a common adversary like an autocratic king.

Nationalism came to sanction the use of force against minorities, because throughout history people became widely scattered. They settled wherever they could find a sanctuary. Consequently, there were few places occupied 100 percent by people of a particular nationality. Just

about every "national" state had a percentage of alien nationalities whose members could be at risk.

Probably the most serious clash between classical liberalism and nationalism occurred in Germany during the 19th century, and the result was that the liberals failed in their bid to impose limits on the power of the Prussian king.

Perhaps what today's classical liberals might learn from nationalism is the importance of emotional appeals, especially emotional appeals about liberty, as well as rational appeals about the unintended consequences of government intervention and inspiring stories about extraordinary things that can be accomplished by free people.

3. *Times were so good, especially in America, that people lost their fear of arbitrary government power.*

This situation is easy to understand among Americans, since the United States hasn't been invaded. The two most memorable attacks -- Pearl Harbor and 9/11 -- didn't threaten the existence of the United States as other countries have been threatened when foreign invaders took over, executed opponents, and installed totalitarian regimes.

The American Progressive movement was born amidst demands for an "energetic" government that some bright people thought was a good idea at the time.

The situation in the rest of the world is puzzling. How can large numbers of people not appreciate the case for limiting arbitrary government power, after having suffered through two world wars and many totalitarian regimes?

How is it possible for so many people to be socialists without recognizing that when government gains control of an economy, it can throttle political opponents?

Maybe the struggle for liberty is only for those who really must struggle or face terrible consequences. This struggle might be comparable to the struggle of poor people who achieve career success, make a lot of money, want to spare their children from the worst risks and privations -

- and then wonder why their children aren't driven like they were.

We can try to instill our values in our children, including our passion for liberty, and yet in many cases children don't care, or they don't care as much as they do for other things. It would be difficult and expensive to arrange a world tour providing memorable glimpses of totalitarian terror, so that some of these became more tangible for kids.

The best thing I can think of is to do whatever can be done to inject libertarian ideas into popular culture by facilitating the development of young-adult books, commercial fiction, fantasies, graphic novels, TV shows, comedy routines, documentaries, movies, websites, songs, videos, and media.

I'm not sure how much can be done, because it appears that few libertarians want to do these things. There are sure to be many false starts and failures before there's a hint of financial success that would make it possible for such work to be self-sustaining.

Providing funding might not help much. It's hard to predict the future performance of talent among creative minds as well as professional athletes. Some authors produce only one memorable book and are never able to do anything as good again. Many authors who get a generous fellowship stipend seem to shut down -- they don't have a primordial urge to write. Some keep producing, but they aren't able to surpass their peak work. A few wonders turn out to be marvelously prolific. It seems hard for most people to be sufficiently focused to develop an idea and see it through to completion.

Although it's easy to be pessimistic, just consider how much influence libertarians have gained because of a tiny number of pathbreakers like Ayn Rand, Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, and Milton Friedman -- in just two fields, fiction and economics. These days, we can count a few comrades in several other fields, and for the most part everything else is wide open.

One of the greatest wonders about liberty is that while it has been crushed everywhere, there have been

remarkable comebacks in some of the most unlikely places. That is sure to happen again and again, wherever the dream can be kept alive.

SOME POSSIBLE ANSWERS TO JIM POWELL'S QUESTION

by George H. Smith

Jim Powell asked the question "Why Did So Many People Turn Away from Classical-Liberal Ideas during the 19th Century?" I addressed this problem in the Epilogue to my book *The System of Liberty: Themes in the History of Classical Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 213-14) (see the [Liberty Matters discussion of Smith's book](#)), and I shall take the liberty of quoting part of that discussion here. Then I will add one more possible factor that contributed to the decline of classical liberalism. I wrote:

By the end of the nineteenth century, classical liberalism had been eclipsed by a "new" liberalism that justified state interference in social relationships to a far greater extent than most old liberals, such as Herbert Spencer, were willing to sanction. Various explanations have been offered for the decline and fall of classical liberalism, including one by Spencer himself, who suggested that the public at large did not understand the true nature of the beneficial reforms for which old liberalism was responsible.

According to Spencer, the old liberals abolished or mitigated grievances suffered by large segments of the population, and these reforms had been brought about by relaxing the scope of governmental interference and thereby expanding the range of individual liberty. But most people, seeing that these beneficial results had *something* to do with government, failed to differentiate between the repeal of onerous laws and the passing of new laws. Quoting Spencer:

[For what, in the popular apprehension and in the apprehension of those who effected them](#), were the changes made by Liberals in the past? They were abolitions of grievances suffered by the people, or by portions of them: this was the common trait they had which most impressed itself on men's minds. They were mitigations of evils which had directly or indirectly been felt by large classes of citizens, as causes to misery or as hindrances to happiness. And since, in the minds of most, a rectified evil is equivalent to an achieved good, these measures came to be thought of as so many positive benefits; and the welfare of the many came to be conceived alike by Liberal statesmen and Liberal voters as the aim of Liberalism. Hence the confusion. The gaining of a popular good, being the external conspicuous trait common to Liberal measures in earlier days (then in each case gained by a relaxation of restraints), it has happened that popular good has come to be sought by Liberals, not as an end to be indirectly gained by relaxations of restraints, but as the end to be directly gained. And seeking to gain it directly, they have used methods intrinsically opposed to those originally used.[\[113\]](#)

Explanations for the decline of classical liberalism were also offered by Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek, who were largely responsible for carrying the torch of liberalism during its dark years in the first half of the 20th century. Mises wrote that Enlightenment liberals "[blithely assumed](#) that what is reasonable will carry on merely on account of its reasonableness. They never gave a thought to the possibility that public opinion could favor spurious ideologies whose realization

would harm welfare and well-being and disintegrate social cooperation.”[\[114\]](#)

Hayek, in contrast, focused on a deficiency in liberal principles themselves as a major factor in the decline of liberalism:

It is thus a misunderstanding to blame classical liberalism for having been too doctrinaire. Its defect was not that it adhered too stubbornly to principles, but rather that it lacked principles sufficiently definite to provide clear guidance.... Consistency is possible only if definite principles are accepted. But the concept of liberty with which the liberals of the nineteenth century operated was in many respects so vague that it did not provide clear guidance.[\[115\]](#)

I now wish to mention one other factor that has rarely if ever been noted by historians of classical liberalism. After the Corn Laws had been repealed in 1846, what happened to the Anti-Corn Law League? — an impressive grassroots organization that might have been used to achieve other liberal causes. Well, the obsession of one of its most brilliant leaders, Richard Cobden, for state education made that virtually impossible. Cobden greatly admired the American common-school system of Horace Mann, and he wanted to direct the manpower and resources of the former Anti-Corn Law League to establish a similar system in England. As his biographer John Morley observed, “Popular education had been the most important of all social objects in [Cobden’s] mind from the first.” But middle-class dissenters had composed a large portion of the League, and a substantial portion of those activists were dissenters who, calling themselves “voluntaryists,” were vehemently opposed to any state involvement in education.[\[116\]](#) Unlike John Bright, a Quaker who sympathized with the voluntaryists, the Anglican Cobden viewed the voluntaryists as reactionaries, in effect, who were fixated on a lost cause for the sake of a principle, and he grew increasingly frustrated with the

actions of Edward Baines, Jr., the leader of the voluntaryists and editor of the *Leeds Mercury*, the most influential provincial paper in England. Cobden wanted to incorporate national education as a liberal plank to make extension of the suffrage more appealing, but Baines and other voluntaryists resolutely opposed this idea. As Cobden wrote to George Combe on May 13, 1848:

You know how cordially I agree with you upon the subject of Education. But I confess I see no chance of incorporating it in any new movement for an extension of the suffrage. The main strength of any such movement must be in the Liberal ranks of the middle class, and they are almost exclusively filled by Dissenters. To attempt to raise the question of National Education amongst them at the present moment, would be to throw a bombshell into their ranks to disperse them.[\[117\]](#)

Soon afterwards (Dec. 28, 1848) Cobden chided Baines for making such a fuss over state education. The principle of state education had become widely accepted, so it seemed pointless to cause a major rift among liberals over a controversy that the voluntaryists could not possibly win. Cobden wrote to Baines:

I doubt the utility of your recurring to the Education question. My views have undergone no change for twenty years on the subject, excepting that they are infinitely strengthened, and I am convinced that I am as little likely to convert you as you me. Practically no good could come out of the controversy; for we must both admit that the *principle* of State Education is virtually settled, both here and in all civilized countries. It is not an infallible test, I admit, but I don’t think there are two men in the House of Commons who are opposed to the principle of National Education.[\[118\]](#)

After Baines had declared that dissenters should vote for any candidate who supported their advocacy of voluntary education, without regard for party affiliation, Cobden declared his intention eventually to forge ahead

with his campaign for national education. On Jan. 5, 1849, Cobden wrote to Combe:

I hope you will not think there is any inconsistency in the strong declaration I made at the meeting, of the paramount importance of the question of Education, and my apparent present inactivity in the matter. Owing to the split in the Liberal party, caused by Baines, it would be impossible for me to make it the leading political subject at this moment. Time is absolutely necessary to ripen it, but in the interim there are other topics which will take the lead in spite of any efforts to prevent it, reduction of expenditure being the foremost; and all I can promise myself is that any influence I may derive now from my connexion with the latter or any other movement, shall at the fitting opportunity be all brought to bear in favour of National Education.^[119]

After nearly two years later, Cobden had lost his patience with Baines and the voluntaryist dissenters. On Nov. 9, 1850, he wrote once again to Combe:

At present the Liberal party, the soul of which is Dissent, are torn to pieces by the question [of state education].... I thought I had given time to Mr. Baines and his dissenting friends to get cool upon the subject. But they appear to be as hot as ever. However, I shall now go straight at the mark, and shall neither give nor take quarter. I have made up my mind to go for the Massachusetts system as nearly as we can get it.^[120]

Cobden's decision to campaign for state education was a nail in the coffin of an organized liberal movement. By focusing on a cause that deeply offended many dissenting liberals, he virtually guaranteed that English liberalism would never again have the collective clout that it had enjoyed during the halcyon days of the Anti-Corn Law League.

Endnotes

^[113.] Herbert Spencer, "The New Toryism," in *The Man Versus the State*, ed. Eric Mack (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1981), 14-15.

^[114.] Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action*, third revised edition (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company), 864.

^[115.] F.A. Hayek, *Law Legislation, and Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973) I:61.

^[116.] See my three libertarian.org essays on the British voluntaryists, beginning here: <https://www.libertarianism.org/publications/essays/critics-state-education-part-2-british-voluntaryists>.

^[117.] John Morley, *The Life of Richard Cobden* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1906), 485.

^[118.] *Ibid.*, 494.

^[119.] *Ibid.*, 505.

^[120.] *Ibid.*, 548.

CONVERTING THE PRINCE?

by Stephen Davies

One point made by people who have thought about strategy for social and political change is that while ideas matter and have an effect, it also matters enormously who believes which ideas when it comes to their having an impact on the real world. Ideas can be widely held among the general population and yet have little direct effect on public policy or the nature of the political system. This is true even (or perhaps particularly) in democracies. If they are honest, libertarians will often be thankful that this is so. In economic policy, for example, the general public's ideas on subjects such as trade or immigration are not of a kind that libertarians would like. Conversely an idea or set of ideas that comes to dominate elite opinion can have an enormous and direct impact.^[121]

George Smith cites a chilling example of this in the case of witchcraft and witch hunting. During the high Middle Ages witchcraft and the belief in witches was seen as a popular superstition and not taken seriously by elites.

(There was a belief in sorcery, the use of ritual magic to gain earthly ends, but this rarely led to prosecutions, and when they did happen they were normally of people who were themselves from the elite). However, during the second half of the 15th century many of the elites came to believe, first, that witches existed and had real power and, second that these powers derived from a pact with Satan, so that witches came to be seen as comprising an organized counter-religion. Because members of the elite believed this, it had an effect on the criminal justice system and in particular meant that local magistrates and clergy now took accusations of witchcraft seriously. When combined with the widespread use of torture to obtain confessions, this led to the great witch hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries.



William Edward Lecky

There are two points to make here. The first is the one that George makes, citing W. E. H. Lecky, that what is crucial for the acceptance of an idea or argument is its credibility, with that depending on criteria of persuasiveness. There were, as he points out, many skeptics at the time, such as Reginald Scott or Johann Weyer, but for many years their arguments had little impact. Suddenly, though, in the early 18th century they succeeded and the witch hunts came to an end. The problem for people such as Scott or Weyer was that the canons of evidence and credibility used at the time meant that their critiques could not be accepted without also denying what were seen as essential Christian

beliefs.^[122] At this time it was difficult if not impossible to be an atheist, not only because of the serious penalties for such a belief but because the mental world of the time was such that without a belief in God the entire world was meaningless and incoherent.^[123]

The second point is that the crucial part of the story was the attitude of the elite. Things changed and witch hunts happened and then stopped because of shifts in opinion among the elite rather than among the wider population. Belief in the existence of witches and their malevolent power remained widespread among the mass of the population long after the witch trials stopped. What was crucial was that the elite who controlled the criminal-justice system had changed their minds. (Or at least enough of them had).

So what does this imply for the spread and success of classical-liberal ideas? The first point is that ideas, no matter how well thought out, will not be credible or plausible if they run counter to what we may call the foundational assumptions of a time. So to advocate reducing the scale of government, or making well-founded critiques of government action and policy, will count for nothing if the idea of a world of minimal government (or a fortiori no government) means for most people chaos and the abandonment of the poor, because the basic idea of voluntary collective action has been lost. So foundational basic beliefs, axioms of thought if you will, matter.

The second point is one where obvious conclusions may actually be misleading. If it is the opinions and beliefs of elites that have an impact rather than those of the general public, then surely it makes sense to focus on influencing those elites rather than bothering with the wider culture. This indeed is the conclusion drawn by advocates of social and political change of all types for a long time. In its early form, during the time of Enlightened Despotism and in the works of people like the Physiocrats, the policy was to convert or educate the king. The idea was that if you could get the king on your side or persuade him and his ministers, then you could move society in a more humane and liberal direction. More recently this has

become the dominant strategy among both left and right of conventional politics.

Now certainly this kind of strategy can have effects, particularly in the short term. It can be useful if the aim is to change a specific policy or to stiffen the spine of policymakers so that they resist misguided popular pressure. However, it has a number of serious problems, which mean that by itself it is very unlikely to bring lasting or extensive success (that being defined as a significant shift of the entire political and social order in a more liberal direction). There are two main problems. The first is that in the case of relatively small and organized groups (which elites are by definition), interests as opposed to ideas count for relatively more than they do for the entire population. This means that ideas will tend to gain traction when they happen to coincide with what the elite or a part of it sees as being its interest. This in turn means that the changes, even if desirable in themselves, will only tend to happen to the extent that they serve elite interests and will often take effect in a form that reflects those interests. Moreover, if elite interests or beliefs shift (which happens much more easily and readily than a shift in general sentiment), then all of the work done previously is undone.

The second problem follows from the first. Despite the obvious reality that elites have more power and therefore their beliefs have more impact, they are not in any society able to do simply what they want or think is right. They are always ultimately constrained by the wider climate of opinion that George referred to in his first piece. So in the United States, many elite figures understand that the entitlement state created by a succession of administrations and congresses since the 1930s is neither desirable nor sustainable, but they can do nothing about this because of widely held beliefs among the population at large (as well as in much elite opinion).

So to bring about fundamental change that is long-lasting, you have to change the dominant beliefs of society. (These are the “core” ideas that David Hart referred to earlier. As Peter Mentzel says, changing these is slow and difficult but nonetheless necessary.) The theorist we should draw on here is Gramsci with his idea of a

hegemonic ideology.^[124] Thinking this way will help you to, among other things, identify the dominant underlying ideas and their weak points. This is where the kind of mass movements Jim Powell talks about comes in. Paradoxically, all the historical evidence is that the best way to change a basic, or foundational, set of beliefs and attitudes is to campaign on a specific issue, one that raises challenges to those basic beliefs and hence changes them. Thus as Peter Mentzel says, antislavery campaigns did not only delegitimize that institution, they propagated an idea of the autonomous individual and undermined the widely held notion that human beings differed substantively in worth or moral standing. (Amongst other things, this undermined conventional notions of the relations between the sexes, which is one of the reasons why so many feminists came out of abolitionism.)

If we think about the current state of affairs in this way we can see one cause for optimism and one huge challenge. In the first place, there has been a growth of the idea that a good life is one of self-realization and the product of personal choice, and this has undermined ideas about traditional authority and led to quite dramatic shifts in attitudes towards issues such as same sex-marriage. Interestingly this shift has been brought about to a great degree by people who favor a substantial role for government in other areas and, in particular, a redistributive welfare system, despite the fact that their success in one area actually undermines the purchase of their arguments in others.

However, there is still the problem of what has been undoubtedly the dominant set of ideas in developed societies since at least the 1930s and arguably the 1890s. This the one I alluded to in my previous piece: the idea that it is both desirable and possible for large-scale social action to be directed and controlled through conscious and purposive action by really smart people using the techniques of something called management. As with all really dominant ideas this is so taken for granted that it is hardly spelt out. The argument instead is over what ends should be pursued in this way and whether the most appropriate medium for the exercise of management and direction is government and its agencies or private

corporate bodies. It is reflected in all kinds of ways in popular culture, such as the obsession with “leadership” and the idea that having one person rather than another in charge of a system can make a huge difference. (All the empirical evidence is that in almost all cases it does not). Another aspect is the concept or notion of a “social problem” as analyzed by George Smith, which implies that there must be some kind of “solution.” Yet another is the way that many people would rather believe that the world is run by amazingly evil and cunning but competent people rather than consider that the people “in charge” are actually incompetent morons who don’t know what they are doing and are making it up as they go along.

So what does that suggest about the kinds of issues Jim raises? More on that later.

Endnotes

[121.] The best known recent work making this point is of course Bryan Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

[122.] See Walter Stephens, “The Sceptical Tradition,” in Brian Levack, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp 101-21.

[123.] Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

[124.] Antonio Gramsci *The Modern Prince and Other Writings* (New York: International Publishers, 1959).

HOW IMPORTANT ARE IDEAS?

by David Gordon

In my initial essay, I suggested that one should not take as *a priori* true the contention that ideas are the prime mover of history. In particular, the extent to which the ideas of classical-liberal thinkers have brought about classical-liberal policies is an empirical issue. In their

contributions to the conversation, both David Hart and Stephen Davies have very helpful comments on the role of ideas in history, and I should like to address what they have to say.



Ludwig von Mises

Hart calls to our attention an important insight of Mises. “According to this view, the economic, political, and other interests which people pursue (whether ordinary people or ruling elites) depend upon the ideas they have about what their interests are.” If this is so, one cannot properly speak of interests as a separate force that produces ideas. As Mises puts the point, “Ideas tell a man what his interests are.”

Mises’s view of interests seems to me correct, but it does not quite speak to the issue I wished to raise in my essay. (To say this need not be a criticism of Hart, as he may not have intended what he says to be a response to me.) That issue, once more, was that the influence of classical-liberal theorists on classical-liberal policies is an empirical question, not one to be settled by *a priori* reasoning.

Suppose someone held, as I certainly do not, that the great classical-liberal theorists had no influence at all on actual policies. That position, wrongheaded though I think it is, would be entirely consistent with Mises’s point

about interests. Perhaps, one might think, if intellectuals aren't influential, then what is the alternative? It must be that material interests determine history. But Mises's point about interests shows that interests aren't independent of ideas. Therefore, the ideas of intellectuals *are* influential.

The argument just mentioned misses the mark. To deny that the views of classical-liberal intellectuals were influential entails nothing about the role in history of material interests or people's perceptions of these interests. Someone who denies the importance of theoretical ideas may hold any of a number of positions about the forces that influence history or, for that matter, have no general theory of history at all. "Ideas matter," taken to mean that philosophical ideas exercise a determining influence on history, and the view that material interests, entirely apart from ideas, determine history, are far from the only alternatives. I was not concerned to deny the former theory, quite the contrary. I meant only to suggest, once more, that the view cannot be established by *a priori* arguments, e.g., by the bad one just canvassed.

Stephen Davies points out two problems with the theory that "it was material changes and changes in the structure of production that led to intellectual, social, and political change." The first problem is that the position "could lead to a kind of fatalism in which there was no point in activism, as you might as well just let material historical evolution take its course." Here I suggest one needs to draw a distinction. Is the question before us whether the theory that material changes and changes in the structure of production cause changes in ideas implies that activism is futile? Or is it, rather, whether believing this theory leads to the belief that activism is futile?

If the question is taken the first way, why does the theory imply that activism is futile? Perhaps the thought underlying the contention is this: If material changes determine the course of history, then it doesn't matter what people think or do. The material forces will determine what happens.

A moment's thought suffices to show that this is nonsense. If "it was material changes and changes in the

structure of production that led to intellectual, social, and political change," then material changes caused people to think and act in certain ways. That is an altogether different notion from the view that, regardless of what people thought or did, the material changes would have brought about the same historical events. A fatalistic view of this kind is altogether different from a determinist view, and I take the material change theory to be a view of the latter kind.

As to the effect of belief in the material-change theory on people's activism, it is by no means the case that accepting the theory has to lead to political quietism. It may or may not do so: one just has to look at individual cases. Suppose, though, that accepting the theory did lead to a decline in activism; and suppose further that one deemed this a matter for regret. That would not be an argument against the truth of the theory. Whether believing something has bad consequences and whether what one believes is true are separate questions.

Davies finds a "more serious problem" with the material-change theory. The problem is that "this makes ideas an epiphenomenon and denies them autonomy." By referring to ideas as an "epiphenomenon," I take Davies to mean that ideas, on this theory, exert no causal influence. They are simply "there" but are irrelevant to how history develops.

Davies holds that the view of ideas as epiphenomenal can be shown to be false. "[T]here is actually a two-way causal relationship in which ideas are articulated in response to physical change but then shape how that change is understood and then in turn lead to purposive action that leads to further changes or directs the spontaneous changes in one direction rather than another."

Davies seems entirely right that ideas shape how change is understood, but this is consistent with the view that material changes cause changes in ideas. If material changes cause changes in ideas, it does not follow that the altered ideas have no effects. Rather, the contention is that no causal chain has as its first member an idea uncaused by a material change. If A causes B and B causes C, it does not follow that A is the "real" cause of C and that B drops out of the causal chain. A supporter

of the material-change view could readily adopt Davies's account, given just above, of the two-way causal relationship. In sum, the contention that ideas aren't first causes does not imply that ideas have no effects.

REVOLUTIONS, IDEAS, AND THE PRINCIPLE OF PRUDENCE

by David M. Hart

Earlier this year, Bryan Caplan posted an interesting piece on our sister website *Econlog* titled "Revolution: Two Minimal Conditions," which is pertinent to our discussion here. The essence of his argument is as follows:[\[125\]](#)

Here's an extremely tempting argument for violent revolution:

1. The existing government is tyrannical, as evidenced by a giant list of specific, well-documented, horrifying crimes against humanity.
2. It is our right, if not our sacred duty, to overthrow tyranny.
3. Tyrannies usually crush non-violent efforts to overthrow them.
4. Tyrannies rarely give in to isolated violent efforts to overthrow them.
5. So the only effective way to exercise our right/duty to overthrow tyranny is to band together for violent revolution.

... Premise #2 is grossly overstated - for two distinct reasons.

First, overthrowing any particular tyranny often involves committing a new giant list of specific, well-documented, horrifying crimes against humanity. The mere fact that you're fighting tyranny doesn't magically keep your hands clean. Indeed, the rhetoric of tyranny makes it

psychologically easy to rationalize whatever new crimes against humanity you end up committing.

Second, overthrowing any particular tyranny typically leads to the rise of a new tyranny. The reasons are familiar: Tyranny arises out of a culture of contempt for human rights, so it's much easier to set up a replacement tyranny than some non-tyrannical system.

...These insights lead straight to two new minimal conditions for morally permissible revolution. Namely: Fomenting revolution is wrong unless you have strong reasons to believe that (a) your revolution will not lead to big, new human rights abuses, and (b) your revolution will not replace one tyranny with another.

Finding revolutions that run afoul of these strictures is child's play. The Arab Spring revolutions violated them. So did most of the movements for colonial independence -- including American independence. But the largely non-violent revolutions in the former Soviet bloc might make the cut. What makes them special? For starters, the focus on abolishing specific bad policies like censorship, state ownership, militarism, and emigration restrictions -- rather than gleefully handing the reins of power to a new group and assuming its members will use their new-found power wisely and justly.

I would like to make four comments. The first is that an important proviso must be added to Premise #2: "Even though it may be our right to resist and even overthrow tyranny, it may be unwise to do so, and we should refrain from doing so on the grounds of prudence."

Second, Caplan does not consider the problem of the classical-liberal or libertarian who is a bystander in a revolutionary upheaval taking place in the given society. Classical liberals and libertarians are now and have been so small in number in the past that they have very rarely instigated revolution (the sole exception to this may be the American Revolution or the first phase of the French Revolution), but they have been caught up when

revolutions started by others have broken out. The moral dilemma facing these liberals is: what should they do? Stay out of it completely? Support the least bad group on the revolutionary side? Or seize the opportunity and start their own liberal subgroup on the revolutionary side (I'm thinking here of Albert Camus's magazine *Combat*, which supported the French resistance in World War II), quietly and secretly providing assistance to individuals persecuted by the existing regime, or supporting the existing regime in order to persuade it to introduce needed reforms and to use as little force as possible.

Third, he says nothing about the state of public opinion at the time this hypothetical revolution breaks out. Have pro-liberty ideas penetrated either the public mind or the ruling elite, and if so, to what degree? If they have, does this mean that the society is now ripe for a successful revolution, and therefore the liberals should participate? If not, then the prognosis for a pro-liberty regime emerging after the revolution is probably zero, that a new dictatorship under a new Napoleon is most likely, and therefore liberals should have nothing to do with it.

Fourth, what do we think of the examples Caplan provides of a "morally permissible revolution"? Many conservatives and libertarians might object to his exclusion of the American Revolution from his list.

Endnotes

[125.] Bryan Caplan, "Revolution: Two Minimal Conditions," *Econlog*, February 11, 2015
<https://www.econlib.org/econlog/archives/2015/02/revolution_a_mi.html>.

SUBVERTING THE PRINCE

by David M. Hart

Steve's and George's comments bring me back to an earlier point I made about ideas, interests, and ruling elites (or class analysis).

Ruling elites believe certain things about themselves, the "public interest," and the world around them. They also disseminate or encourage others to believe some of these ideas (usually via the public school system) in order to remain in power and to further their own interests. These include the ideas that the elites have a divine right to rule, have greater wisdom and knowledge with which to make decisions, have a mandate from the people, won the war or revolution which brought them to power, etc.

Ordinary people for the most part accept these ideas and resist attempts to change their minds because they think different ideas and practices based on those new ideas will harm their interests. They may believe that the gods will be angry with them, or that they are too ignorant and stupid to run the country, or that they participated in the election which elected the ruler.

Thus I think we can identify three cracks in the ideological rock into which classical liberals can insert their crowbar of criticism in order to split it open:

The first crack is the ideas which are held by the rulers themselves. We need to sow the seeds of FUD -- fear, uncertainty, and doubt -- in their minds concerning their ideology of power. They need to be afraid of being resisted, opposed, or thrown out of office. They need to fear being ignored (what I call the "La Boétie Effect" after the 16th-century French magistrate),^[126] to be uncertain that their orders will be obeyed (from below) or carried out (by disgruntled government officials), and there must be growing self-doubt within the ruling elite itself about their legitimacy to rule and their ability to run or plan the economy. This ideological "rot from within" occurs rarely, but it has happened before in revolutionary moments when the ruling elite seemed to evaporate before people's eyes (such as in France in the early phase of the revolution, and the fall of the Soviet Union).

The second ideological crack we should work on are the ideas held by ordinary people about the State and the ruling elite.

We need to encourage the demythologizing of the state and the rulers in the eyes of ordinary people ("the Emperor has no clothes" strategy). This includes fostering a loss of respect for the elites as special, pointing out that they consist in flawed individuals with interests and weaknesses like everyone else, and teaching that they are not as smart as they and other people think. In other words, we want many more "Watergate moments," which did so much to expose the criminal activities and lies of the Nixon administration.

We also want to encourage the loss of belief in the idea of the "two moralities," namely, that there is one set of moral principles for the rulers and another one for the ruled. We need to use harsh language, to call a spade a spade," to identify taxation, regulation, and subsidies as the plunder and theft they in fact are. We want to shake faith in the rulers' ability to carry out what they have promised, in other words to make the "efficiency argument" (or "inefficiency argument" in this case) as best we can. Steve Davies's strong version of this view is that it is impossible for *anybody* to plan an economy on a large scale, not just a particular ruler. We want people to realize that they have been duped by the elites about the general interest and that the elites in fact cloak their own personal or class interests behind self-serving arguments, or sophisms.

As you might be able to tell from the language I have used here ("two moralities," "harsh language," "plunder," "dupes," "sophisms") this is the strategy adopted by Bastiat in the 1840s with his wonderful series of essays known as the [*Economic Sophisms*](#), written to expose the false and sophistical arguments used by the elites in favor of protection and subsidies for industry.[\[127\]](#)

The third crack corresponds to ordinary people's ideas about how the free market functions.

We need to persuade people that what they do in their ordinary lives (producing, trading, saving, consuming) is moral and just, and leads to personal fulfillment and prosperity for them and their families. We need to show them that there are already existing, efficient, cheap, and plausible voluntary market alternatives to state-run and

state-regulated activities. We need to encourage people to go about their business and wherever possible to ignore government regulations, taxes, and prohibitions, and that to do this is moral and just.

To further these three goals, several types of intellectual activity need to be undertaken. They are listed in descending order according to the structure of production of ideas:

- support for the development of economic and political theory to continue to undermine the ruling elites and their advisors about the efficacy and morality of what they are doing;
- writing muckraking biographies and histories of the ruling elites, key leaders, and the most important institutions of the state to expose their corruption, incompetence, and failure;
- fostering a critical press not blinded by the aura of the ruler, a press that asks penetrating questions about what the state is doing and that is willing to report this to the public;
- develop a core group of politicians in Congress who are willing to hold the wielders of power to account with enquiries, threats of impeachment, and the withholding of funding for government projects, etc.;
- mount legal challenges to the most outrageous violations of citizens' liberties;
- spread a better understanding among ordinary people of how politics and free markets really work;
- encourage the development of a popular culture which is willing to use what Bastiat termed "the sting of ridicule" in order to mock and belittle wielders of power and what they do; and
- encourage people either to refuse to participate in civic rituals in which the state or the ruler/leader is honored or venerated, or to adopt the age-old practice of the Catholic

Church: taking existing pagan holidays and turn them to their own purposes.

Regarding the latter, I have in mind here the British celebration of Guy Fawkes Day on November 5,^[128] when people were encouraged by the Protestant British state to create effigies of the Catholic would-be assassin and burn them in public squares. Over the years the people have taken matters into their own hands and changed this ritual into burning effigies of their most disliked political leaders. I'm sure some creative people could turn the American Presidents Day into a similar pro-liberty ritual, perhaps using Ivan Eland's book *Recarving Mount Rushmore* with its list of good and bad presidents as guidance.^[129]

Endnotes

^[126.] Étienne de la La Boétie, *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, trans. Harry Kurz (1942). <[/titles/2250](#)>.

^[127.] Frédéric Bastiat, *Economic Sophisms*, trans. Arthur Goddard, introduction by Henry Hazlitt (Irvington-on-Hudson: Foundation for Economic Education, 1996). <[/titles/276](#)>.

^[128.] James Sharpe, *Remember, Remember the Fifth of November: Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot* (London: Profile Books, 2006).

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THE SPREAD OF IDEAS

by David Gordon

In “Does the Structure of Production Apply to Ideas?” Jeffrey Tucker rightly points out that the consumption of ideas is nonrivalrous. My thinking about classical liberalism, e.g., does not interfere with anyone else’s thought of it. “A good is either rivalrous in ownership and control or it is not. It either has to be reproduced following consumption or not. It either depreciates in its physical integrity or it does not. If I am wearing my

shoes now, no one else can wear them at the same time. But if I hold an idea and decide to share it with the world, I can retain my ownership while permitting the creation of infinite numbers of copies. In this sense, ideas evade all the limitations of the physical world.”

Tucker uses this point to challenge David Hart’s application of the structure of production to ideas. “This is the difference between ideas and scarce property. They are produced and distributed in a completely different way. None of the conditions that cause the structure of production to exist in the physical world actually apply to the world of ideas. Their functioning is radically different.” So different is the world of ideas from production of physical goods, he suggests, that one should not even in a metaphorical sense speak of the structure of production of ideas.

I do not think that nonrivalrousness has the drastic consequences that Tucker suggests. Once an idea has been made public, someone who is aware of the idea does not need to produce it again. He can make use of the existing idea. But someone must first produce the idea, and we can investigate how that came about. Further, once the idea has been produced, the question arises: how was it disseminated? This too requires inquiry.

If this is so, Hart’s structure of production model, for all Tucker has said against it, is still in the running. It may be that new ideas are produced and made available to the public in exactly the way Hart suggested. In my own essay, I claimed that ideas, by contrast with physical goods, need not be produced according to Hart’s model; but what rules out that they at least sometimes are? The fact that an idea need not be invented anew each time it is used and the further fact that the same idea can be simultaneously used by many people have no bearing on the case.

Tucker also says, “An idea is also immortal: the ideas produced by Plato or Einstein are available forever.” Is this so? If people do not become aware of these ideas, and understand them, will they not be forgotten?

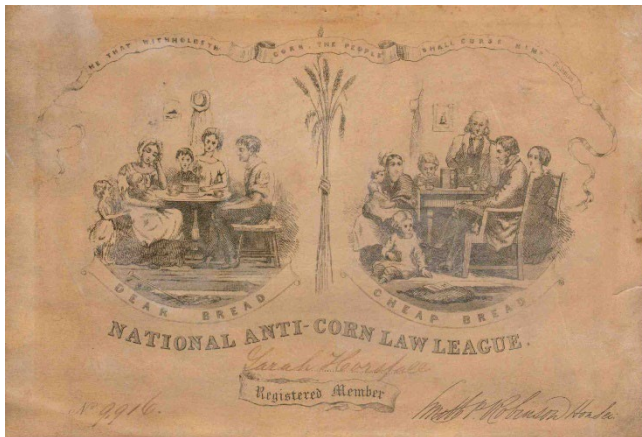
FORBIDDEN METAPHORS, EMPIRICISM, AND ANOTHER CASE STUDY

by David M. Hart

"So different is the world of ideas from production of physical goods that one should not even in a metaphorical sense speak of the structure of production of ideas."

"The influence of classical-liberal theorists on classical-liberal policies is an empirical question, not one to be settled by *a priori* reasoning."

On Answering Empirical Questions



I couldn't agree more with David Gordon about the need to ask empirical questions about how ideas are produced and distributed, and how they influence public policy. My current research and publishing interest in the Leveller Tracts of the 1640s and 1650s, and the French classical-liberal economists around Frédéric Bastiat and Gustave de Molinari in the 1840s and 1850s deal precisely with these matters.^[130] I would also add that the previous Liberty Matters discussions of the Institute of Economic Affairs, the Anti-Corn Law League, and the work of Deirdre McCloskey on the intellectual origins of the Industrial Revolution also focused on this same thing.^[131] It was a result of these empirical studies that I came to think that Austrian capital theory might provide some insights of a more abstract nature which might help explain how ideas and

their means of transmission come to be produced and distributed over long periods of time, and to help us see if there are any glaring gaps in our own activities in the present.

I had hoped that David Gordon would have told us more about the strategies adopted by the Mises Institute for its programs, especially its online Academy -- why it chose this strategy over others (there are opportunity costs related to ideas and strategies as there are to goods and services), in what ways it improves on strategies used in the past, and where it sees this form of the dissemination of classical-liberal ideas heading in the future.

Ideas might be Free but Books are not: the Production and Distribution of the Ideas in Rothbard's *Man, Economy, and State*

Ideas may or may not be immortal, but they are embodied and transmitted in physical objects like the pages in a book, or dots of light on a computer screen or tablet, which do decay over time. Books have to be edited, published, distributed, and sold in the marketplace, and re-edited and republished in different formats as the times dictate. E-books in many cases are a product of printed books which have been coded to HTML, formatted by programmers and designers, and then distributed via a website. That more than one person can think "Rothbardian thoughts" at the same time is not disputed; nor is it disputed that that one can reproduce these same "Rothbardian thoughts," at least in theory, at a negligible cost by pushing a key on a computer keyboard. But to teach these thoughts to another person and to assist him in understanding them requires a thoughtful editor, a knowledgeable teacher, a classroom (which may be virtual), some willing students, and suitable teaching materials -- as well as funders and organizers who make all this possible. These latter things are precisely what the Mises Academy has been providing since its founding in 2010.^[132]

To take one set of ideas as an example, Rothbard's *Man, Economy and State* (1962), we can draw a line from its origins in the 1950s to its use in one of the Mises Academy's online courses today. Its publication,

distribution, and use was the result of the purposeful action of many individuals over a long period of time and at considerable cost, and involved the activities of a number of far-seeing and patient investors and entrepreneurs of ideas.

Rothbard of course attended Mises seminar at New York University in the 1950s and learnt at the feet of the master. Rothbard's book was conceived by some far-seeing intellectual entrepreneur in the William Volker Fund who thought there should be a more accessible version of Mises's magnum opus *Human Action* (1949) in order to reach a broader market for ideas. That entrepreneur persuaded the investors and managers who ran the Fund that there might be a market for such a book and that Rothbard was the man to write it. Funding was arranged for Rothbard to write the book, which he did during the 1950s. The project grew in scope and became much more than a textbook (as originally intended) but a major Austrian economics treatise in its own right. The intellectual entrepreneurs of the Volcker Fund were persuaded that this change in plans for the book was sound and that they should continue funding Rothbard until it was completed. The conception and undertaking of this book project is an excellent example of the highest order of production of ideas by an original thinker. The project was interrupted when it was decided (under quite strange circumstances) to wind up the Fund in 1963. Rothbard's textbook-turned-treatise became *Man, Economy, and State*, which was published in 1962 but still in an incomplete form. The final section, *Power and Market*, appeared later in a separate volume in 1970 published by the Institute for Humane Studies, a spin-off from the now-defunct William Volker Fund.

Another group of investors and entrepreneurs of ideas who were unhappy at how poorly Austrian economic ideas, especially those of Mises and Rothbard, were being promoted, decided to form the Ludwig von Mises Institute in 1982. They raised money to fund the Institute and began republishing and selling a large number of books and journals dealing with Austrian

economics ; the institute has also sold and given away books in electronic versions via the Mises.org website.

In addition to the publishing and online ventures, the Mises Institute also has promoted the ideas via annual Austrian economics conferences, a Mises University, newsletters, and discussion circles. All these are costly undertakings, which the managers of the Institute thought would best further their goals. The scholars who participated in these activities were engaged in a lower but still high-order of production and distribution of ideas.

The Mises Institute also undertook the task of completing the production of Rothbard's magnum opus . The third and final stage in the long story of the production of *Man, Economy, and State* was the appearance of the "Scholar's Edition" in 2004, in which the two parts were finally reunited and published as originally planned in the early 1960s, along with a thoughtful introduction by Joe Salerno.^[133] This intellectual project was made possible by the financial investment and support of dozens of patrons (investors), whose names take up an entire page at the front of the book.

Recently, the institute's board decided to revamp the website at considerable cost and to more heavily promote online learning, with courses taught by leading scholars of Austrian economic and social theory, such as David Gordon himself. There is even a course entirely devoted to Rothbard's *Man, Economy, and State* taught by Robert P. Murphy, among the more than 50 courses on offer.^[134] It would be interesting to know how many copies the Scholar's Edition of *Man, Economy, and State* has sold, how many copies were downloaded for free, how many students have enrolled in the online course, the completion rate, and what the feedback has been. These outreach programs are another order closer to the final consumption of ideas by students and other individuals who are not scholars but who might become scholars, teachers, journalists, congressional aides, or whatever, sometime down the road.

The next stage of our analysis will be to track the impact of the lengthy structure of production and

dissemination of the ideas in *Man, Economy, and State* from the mid-1950s to 2015 on the intellectual and political climate of our times -- perhaps someone will be able to do this in 2032, following Peter Mentzel's 70-year rule of thumb between publication of a key text and the implementation of some of its ideas. In the shorter term, we do know that Austrian economics has influenced the thought and behavior of Ron Paul, especially with his sustained criticism of the Federal Reserve and his calls for it to be audited. He in turn has influenced many younger voters. However, at this stage there is no evidence that any legislation has been enacted (or repealed) as a result of this interest in Austrian economics, but the potential is very much there for this to happen in the future. Perhaps our hypothetical future historian of liberty might be able to show that the bill repealing the Federal Reserve was put forward by the head of the Anti-Federal Reserve League, who had completed Robert Murphy's online course when she was a student.

In conclusion, I would say the history of Rothbard's *Man, Economy, and State* provides us with another good empirical example of my thesis.

Endnotes

[130.] *Tracts on Liberty by the Levellers and their Critics (1638-1659)*, 7 vols. Edited by David M. Hart and Ross Kenyon (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 2014).

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<[/collections/139](#)>; *The Collected Works of Frédéric Bastiat*. 6 Vols. Jacques de Guenin, General Editor.

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[131.] Liberty Matters discussion of John Blundell, "Arthur Seldon and the Institute of Economic Affairs" (November, 2013) <[/pages/seldon-and-the-iea](#)>;

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<[/pages/lm-mccloskey](#)>; Stephen Davies, "Richard Cobden: Ideas and Strategies in Organizing the Free-Trade Movement in Britain" (January 2015)

<[/pages/lm-cobden](#)>.

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<<https://academy.mises.org/courses/ae1/>>;

Production and the Market Process (All middle chapters)

<<https://academy.mises.org/courses/production/>>;

Money, Monopoly, and Market Intervention (All ending chapters) <<https://academy.mises.org/courses/money-monopoly-market-intervention/>>".

COUNTER-SOCIETY: SHRINK THE STATE OR GROW THE MARKET?

by Stephen Davies

In the discussion of the process by which ideas are articulated and developed, spread and made influential, and ultimately play a part in changing the world, the final stage is the one that Jim Powell discusses: mass movements that demand a change in some crucial aspect of the way things are. Often these are led by social or political entrepreneurs who seize on opportunities created by the conjuncture of new

techniques, moments of endogenous change or crisis, and the articulation of persuasive arguments and narratives to put pressure on the status quo and its defenders. Often the crucial point is that the change aimed at has significant knock-on effects, or consequences, cascade effects if you will, and that the campaign itself, as well as the change, brings about long-lasting and significant change in the core beliefs and outlook of a population. The campaigns against slavery and for free trade were both examples of this.

An important point is that such campaigns, as Jim points out, are not narrowly political. One way of understanding them is to use a different idea from economics: public goods. Political activity and significant social and political change are public goods with significant free-rider problems. What campaigns of this kind do, *inter alia*, is to 'bundle' the public good of purposive collective activity with private goods such as entertainment or (important historically) religious observance. However, they are still political in the general sense that the aim in concrete terms is a change in the law, institutions, or public policy.

Why do this? Perhaps the most effective way of changing things in many cases is to change society through social action and have political change follow as a consequence. Classical liberals and libertarians of all kinds (including, in other words, libertarian conservatives and egalitarians) agonize over how to shrink the state and are ruefully aware of the obstacles. Instead of doing this, why not look at the problem from the other end and think about not how to shrink the state but how to grow the market and voluntary cooperation? The idea would be to grow institutions and practices to the point where, first of all, they start to actually crowd out government supply and, second, they start to change popular outlook and perceptions. This "counter-society" strategy was most fully spelt out by the late Samuel Konkin,^[135] but has been tried in a small way in a number of places. One point to bear in mind is the one made by Tyler Cowen: while the state takes a much larger share of national income than it did in 1900, because of economic growth since then, the

share taken by the private sector is in absolute terms much larger. Consequently the resources available are greater.

For example, if we were to list the issues that have the salience and significance that slavery or free trade had, one of the first would be education, which George Smith identified (correctly in my view) as one of the big failures for 19th-century classical liberals. A huge amount of energy has been spent on advocating and lobbying for things like school choice, vouchers, and the like. Why not rather simply get into the business of creating mass low-cost and efficient private education? Crucially I do not mean setting up private schools, which is the route many have tried. Rather look to create all kinds of new and innovative ways of delivering education that escape the model of schooling invented by the Prussians all those years ago. Doing this kind of thing not only changes society by changing the way people behave, it also changes the core ideas through both argument and experience, and it undermines, to the extent it succeeds, one of the core institutions of the modern state and its associated elites. Surely this is worth trying.

Endnotes

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SHORT THOUGHTS

by Stephen Davies

First, I agree with what David Gordon says about my comments about ideas and their relation to material conditions. I should have been clearer. The problem of passivity that comes about as a result of a strict materialist view of historical change is due not to the thing itself (I agree with what he says about that) but to people believing that is the case. That's why I

mentioned Karl Kautsky and the kind of deterministic view of history he put forward, which both Bernstein and Lenin reacted against. I don't think the argument is actually about ideas and interests (again, I agree with David on this). Rather it is that neither a purely materialist nor a purely idealist account of historical change is correct. Ideas do matter, but they are not the only cause of change. Material circumstances and conditions also play a part, and what you have to do is work out how the two interact -- an admittedly tricky task.

Second, thinking about Jason Kuznicki's remarks about style does prompt some thoughts. The main one is that classical liberals should simply read some of the basic work about how to be persuasive. There are a number of simple things that come from this, such as that saying things with a smile is always better than being aggressive. Mr. Angry is not going to win many arguments, particularly if your target audience gets the impression (often rightly) that you are angry with them. One crucial thing is to know what kinds of language and imagery are appealing or will be simply understood. This is more difficult than it used to be because of the collapse of the common language of references to things such as scripture and classical history. But this is a problem for everyone, so it should not handicap classical liberals disproportionately.

The most important text that people should read, though, is Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind*.^[136] As he points out, arguments of certain kinds will make sense to some people but not everyone. The big problem for classical liberals is that arguments they find convincing are like water off a duck's back for over half the population. So, for example, showing that somebody's positions are inconsistent is a devastatingly effective argument to libertarians because they value consistency highly. Most people, however, are simply not bothered by this. Arguments based on "thinking" rather than "feeling" are also not effective. Above all, arguments about efficiency are persuasive to economists or the economically trained but not to anyone else. What is striking about Haidt's model (as he points out)

is that while classical liberals can understand and are to some extent receptive to the kinds of arguments made by "progressives," the same is not true in reverse -- and this is not a matter of simple prejudice or closed-mindedness. (He argues that it is conservatives who have this problem, but that is because he defines "conservative" in the misleading and muddled contemporary American way. In reality many of the arguments made by contemporary conservatives have a considerable resonance for some people on the "progressive" side because they play off a shared concern with the polarity of sanctity versus degradation.) What this means, as Jim Peron, for example, has been arguing at the [Moorfield Storey blog](#),^[137] is that classical liberals need to use the language and address the concerns of those on the "progressive" side. Otherwise they will simply be ignored.

Endnotes

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^[137.] Moorfield Storey Blog <<http://storeyinstitute.blogspot.com/>>. See for example the post "Ten Commandments for Libertarians" (Thursday, September 5, 2013) <<http://storeyinstitute.blogspot.com/2013/09/ten-commandments-for-libertarians.html>>.

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