

The Individualists: Radicals, Reactionaries, and the Struggle for the Soul of Libertarianism

Matt Zwolinski and John Tomasi

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023 (432 pages)

Ask for a definition of libertarianism and you will get variegated answers. Some libertarians are politically anarchist. Others focus on free market economics. Still others see individual maximization of sexual freedom and legalization of drugs as a primary goal. Anyone who studies libertarianism or claims to be one is going to find definitions that seem to be at odds. The variations often conflict in seemingly irreconcilable ways.

As it turns out, the conflict is real. As the political philosophers Matt Zwolinski and John Tomasi show in *The Individualists: Radicals, Reactionaries, and the Struggle for the Soul of Libertarianism*, there have been a wide range of expressions of libertarianism throughout the movement's existence. For example, there have been libertarians who have argued for expanding voting rights and others who have argued no one should vote. Some libertarians have pushed for a robust social safety net, but others contend there should be no government welfare. The authors identify six major markers of libertarianism that unite the various strands: private property, skepticism of authority, free markets, spontaneous order, individualism, and negative liberty. These topics provide a rubric for Zwolinski and Tomasi to explain the intellectual history of the libertarian movement. The main argument of the book is that libertarianism is a broader historical movement than most realize, with roots in both Europe and the United States. Libertarianism, they show, consists of a wide range of expressions that have served as reactions against prevailing, existential threats to liberty. Though there are historical elements to the book, the philosophical interests of the authors influence the framing, which is topical rather than chronological.

The book begins with a brief introduction, then moves into eight chapters with a separate conclusion. Chapter 1 begins with a survey of the range of libertarianism throughout history, as well as a brief definition of each of the six markers that identify the movement. In the second chapter, the authors trace three major eras in libertarian thought. Primordial libertarianism emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century in France, Great Britain, and the United States to deal with issues raised by the Industrial Revolution. There was a notably anti-capitalistic aspect to this version of libertarianism, especially in America. Cold War libertarianism was a response to the economic collectivism of communism. All its proponents lean toward free markets and limited government, though diverse thinkers such as Ayn Rand and Friedrich Hayek are included in this era. Third wave libertarianism emerged in the past three decades with a greater focus on social liberties than free market economics. The authors put themselves in this third category.

After the first two chapters lay the definitional groundwork, the last six chapters trace the evolution of libertarian thought on the six shared themes. Chapter 3 addresses the widely varied approaches to private property among libertarians. The variations here are significant, with concepts like self-ownership that led to arguments for slave abolition, but which also led to arguments for and against capitalism and industrialism. The fourth chapter surveys the range of views on the state. Some sort of limited government has always been in view for libertarians, but the limits range from allowing governments to provide for the general economic welfare, or doing away with the state all together. Chapter 5 looks at the oscillating relationship between libertarianism and big business. Early stages of libertarianism were anti-capitalist and sometimes supported forms of socialism that were intended to free people to live the way they chose. In opposition to the oppression of communism, libertarians tended to take a friendlier view to businesses, with signs of opposition forming in an age of increasing crony capitalism.

Chapter 6 explores trends in libertarian thought regarding spontaneous order, particularly as it relates to the poor. Yet again, there are significant variations as the freedom of markets, ebb and flow. What is clear, however, is that charges of social Darwinism are inconsistent with the libertarian interest in those on the margins. In the seventh chapter, Zwolinski and Tomasi examine individualism with its impact on racial justice as the primary focus. In general, the concern for individual rights undermines state sanctioned racism, though the absence of penalties for private racism in the libertarian ideal sometimes allows invidious discrimination to persist. As a result, libertarians have been somewhat inconsistent in ending racism. Chapter 8 takes up the final topic of common concern—negative rights. This topic is examined primarily through the libertarian view that people and goods should be able to freely cross borders. Tariffs and travel restrictions impinge on individual rights and make conflict more likely. The concluding pages of the volume tie the chapters together, emphasizing the common points of dialogue along with the wide variety in concepts that have been part of the libertarian tradition.

If you do not like the weather right now, just wait a little while. The same is true of libertarianism. *The Individualists* documents the continual changes in the libertarian movements. Always an underdog, libertarians are transformed by their alliances and as new concerns come to the foreground. Zwolinski and Tomasi show that libertarians provide a helpful corrective to trends in society. In some sense, to be libertarian is to forever live in the desert eating locusts wearing a camel hair tunic. It may not be comfortable, but someone needs to be a prophet.

The key strength in this volume is the sheer scope of the research. This volume significantly expands the scope of earlier studies on libertarianism, such as Brian Doherty's book *Radicals for Capitalism* (Public Affairs, 2007), which begins in the mid-twentieth century. The notes are detailed and extensive, with primary sources

that span the history of the movement. The case made for common themes within libertarianism is compelling. Though the proposed policies change constantly, the authors aptly show the consistent currents in the movement.

The structure of six markers of libertarianism and the general division between the three eras makes sense as presented. However, the emphasis on “Bleeding Heart Libertarianism,” in which both Tomasi and Zwolinski play a significant role, may outweigh the actual impact of the relatively recent movement. A cynical reader might suspect that an underlying purpose of the volume is to solidify the position of their movement as a legitimate heir to the libertarian legacy.

The biggest challenge for readers is keeping lesser-known libertarians straight as they pop in and out of the narrative. A chart of major figures and their key ideas about the six themes would have been a helpful addition. Overall, this is an excellent resource that provides clarity to an incredibly diverse movement. It is a helpful volume that will be useful for decades to come.

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Climate Change, Radical Uncertainty and Hope: Theology and Economics in Conversation

Jan Jorrit Hasselaar

Amsterdam University Press, 2023 (180 pages)

Jan Jorrit Hasselaar is the director of the Amsterdam Centre for Religion and Sustainable Development in Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. With a background in economics and theology (19–20), it is understandable that he would apply his training to the wicked problem of anthropogenic climate change (ACC), an issue he accepts as settled fact (16).

Hasselaar frames his study in the following way. He contends that ACC is both an economic problem and a theological problem (9). Both approaches have something to contribute because both address the *oikos*, the household in which we live. But Hasselaar’s use of economics and theology are somewhat unusual. In regard to economics, the author follows Dan Rodrik’s understanding of economics not as a description of social behavior but as a set of models and tools to solve problems (28–29). Likewise with theology, Hasselaar does not focus on the study of God and his divine decrees but on how theology describes the good life (14). Thus, Hasselaar’s engagement with economics and theology is decidedly abstract and at an academic level rather than at an applied one.