

Milton Friedman

William Ruger

New York: Continuum, 2011 (227 pages)

This is a fine intellectual biography of Milton Friedman, the world-famous American economist and public intellectual who died a few years ago at the ripe old age of ninety-four. William Ruger, a political scientist at Texas State University–San Marcos, does a good job of describing Friedman’s scholarly contributions in the context of the major policy debates that took place within the field of economics during the twentieth century, and he also attempts to evaluate their continuing influence and relevance for today’s problems and concerns. Although the tone is generally admiring, it is not hagiographic. Indeed, on several occasions the author proves quite willing to criticize or qualify his subject’s arguments if he feels this is necessary—a “fair and balanced” approach that adds to the book’s value for readers who might be approaching Friedman’s work for the first time.

Ruger starts by providing a detailed account of Friedman’s education and professional career (chap. 1). This is a story that has been narrated before, most notably by Friedman himself in his autobiography (*Two Lucky People*, coauthored with his wife Rose and published in 1998). Although this chapter does not provide any new biographical data beyond what is available in the published record, it is nonetheless a well-crafted and useful summary of a remarkably productive life. One interesting fact that emerges from this survey is that, although the Nobel-Prize-winning scholar is clearly prefigured in the brilliant graduate student and young professional, nothing about the “early” Milton Friedman would have led us to anticipate that he would also one day rise to prominence as a leading spokesman for free-market economics. In fact, if anything, one might have expected contrary inclinations. Thus, Ruger mentions that as a young man Friedman was described as having “very strong New Deal leanings” (8, 15), and at several points he stresses Friedman’s early “Keynesian” views (16, 21–22). Because we know that by the mid-1950s his libertarian views were well established, the question arises as to when exactly—and how and why—this very competent technical economist with no strong ideological commitments suddenly decided to embark on a second career as a crusader for the market economy.

Many scholars have mentioned the importance of his participation, at the invitation of F. A. Hayek, in the founding meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS) in 1947. Ruger tends to concur and, citing Daniel Hammond, notes that this was “probably the key single event in the formation of Friedman’s ideology.” He also argues, however, that “Friedman must already have been well down the road to classical liberalism before leaving” for the MPS meeting (34), and that we will probably never know what explains his intellectual transformation because “there was no single moment when Friedman saw the classical liberal light” (35). Friedman himself could not explain it; as he once put it, there was no “Saul of Tarsus moment” (66). Thus, this is a puzzle that will continue to intrigue scholars for the foreseeable future.

Chapter 2 is devoted to reviewing Friedman's major achievements in technical economics, as well as his most important contributions to public policy debates. It also includes a fairly detailed, critical discussion of "Friedman's Political Theory" in which Ruger notes approvingly that "Friedman was always pragmatic in his approach to politics. In particular, he was amenable—much to the chagrin of some of his fellow libertarians—to compromises and half steps that would produce a freer society even if only incrementally.... This willingness to compromise was likely part of the reason for his unparalleled success (for a radical and a libertarian) in being taken seriously by political actors" (96–97). On the other hand, Ruger argues that Friedman's political thought was not very sophisticated, and even somewhat inconsistent:

Friedman's political theory was not a tight philosophical system in which he resolved or even seemed to seriously grapple with the possible tensions among the values he cherished. In fact, he had little interest in wrangling with any of the fundamental philosophical issues within liberal thought, including the defense of individual freedom or material welfare as the highest ends.... One likely reason is that [he] was simply more interested in doing economics and pushing for a freer society through his engagement in public policy debates than he was in exploring the philosophical nuances of liberal thought.... [However,] it is perhaps unfair to criticize Friedman too much in this regard since he was an economist, not a political or moral philosopher, and never pretended to be otherwise. Instead, when it came to politics, he was an applied theorist and popularizer of a certain type of political thought that had been explored in more detail by others (98–99).

At one point, Ruger almost seems to raise his hands in frustration: "Thus, Friedman's position almost approached the notion that freedom is the ultimate value—except when it's not!... Indeed, it might be impossible to impose a system on Friedman's thought other than to say he was a classical liberal" (101).

Given Friedman's importance as a monetary economist, it should come as no surprise that monetary issues figure prominently in this lengthy chapter. Other subjects that are discussed in some detail include his views on the issue of school vouchers, social-welfare policy and his "negative income tax" proposal, military conscription and his role in the movement to end the draft, and the thorny issue of drug policy. One other section in this chapter that might be of great interest to readers of this journal is a discussion of his famous attack on the notion of the "social responsibility of business."

In the last two chapters, Ruger assesses the reception and influence of Friedman's ideas and their contemporary relevance. He points to evidence showing that Friedman, years after his death—and *many* years after his retirement from active research—continues to influence the ideas of economists and policymakers. "But," posits Ruger, "will he be long remembered? Does Friedman have much staying power compared to other big thinkers of the twentieth century?" Very prudently, he prefers to leave this question open. Echoing Zhou Enlai on the French Revolution, he simply states that "it is much too early to tell" (191).

Overall, this book is an excellent summary of a large corpus of sometimes quite technical material, and, to the author's credit, he somehow manages to do it in plain

English and without using a single equation, graph, or chart. The result is a highly readable account that really *can* be understood by the proverbial “educated layman.” (Might this have anything to do with the fact that Ruger is a political scientist? A typical modern economist would not have resisted the temptation to spice things up with fancy footwork and technical jargon.)

The only thing that I dislike about this book is its price. It is a handsome little volume, but I am not at all convinced that it is worth \$130, and I doubt that very many copies will be sold at that price. The other volumes in this series are similarly priced, and one has to wonder what the publishers were thinking by deciding to price themselves out of the market. (Milton Friedman, a great believer in downward-sloping demand curves, might have wondered too, or perhaps he might have uncovered some hidden economic rationality in such a counterintuitive decision.) Nevertheless, the list price for this book practically guarantees a very small market for it, which in turn means that very few people will read it—and that is a real shame.

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Heavenly Merchandize: How Religion Shaped Commerce in Puritan America

Mark Valeri

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Few groups in American history have received more attention, relative to their numbers, than the Puritans of New England. In part, this is a function of sources: The clergy and laity of New England left plentiful diaries, letters, and other records for historians to mine for new angles and insights. In part, too, it is a function of New England’s early dominance as a center of higher education and scholarship: It is only natural that historians emerging from Yale and Harvard would focus attention on their predecessors, the alumni of America’s oldest seminaries and colleges.

Neither religion nor commerce has escaped this historical scrutiny, although Puritan religion has certainly received the lion’s share of attention. Even so, serious efforts to weave the narratives of business and religion into one coherent story have been rare. Mark Valeri does so successfully in this well-informed account of New England’s colonial period.

Valeri’s thesis is that, through a complex interaction between religion and business—occurring at both societal and personal levels—Puritan theology gradually permitted more and more space for the commercial activity conducted by the region’s tradesmen. Another way to put it is that the views expressed by Puritan clergy about business grew less critical and more accepting of the capitalist economy emerging in the British colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

There is a way to make such a case that is simplistic and insensitive to the nuances of theological discourse (sermons are the main source for Valeri’s descriptions). Taking that way means describing minister John Cotton (1585–1652) as a “medieval” on