

A PASSIONATE DEFENSE OF LIBERTARIANISM

by Tibor R. Machan

Upon arriving on these shores several decades ago and learning about the unique American political and cultural tradition from the numerous writers translated into Hungarian, I wanted to find out just what makes for this uniqueness. I have concluded, after some years of search and research, that what this culture has put in place, sometimes deliberately, sometimes willy-nilly, is a philosophy of individual liberty.

Ironically, when I first awoke to serious politics, it was prompted by reading *National Review*. Indeed, it was Russell Kirk who wrote there about a certain undergraduate college in such glowing terms that I decided to enroll. I later graduated from Claremont Men's (now McKenna) College in 1965. There I met Bill Buckley, Martin Diamond, Werner Dannhauser, Harry Jaffa, and many other stars of the diverse conservative intelligentsia.

But shortly after my becoming acquainted with *National Review's* political outlook, I also encountered the works of Ayn Rand. This was during my first philosophy course at the U.S. Air Force's University of Maryland extension at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. And as someone eager to come to grips with the difference between communism, Western European culture, and the United States' political heritage, I found that Rand made better sense than the conservatives.

Monumental Injustice. The main reason was that Ayn Rand had confidence in the human individual, while conservatives lacked this confidence, indeed demeaned it. In his famous book *The Conservative Mind*, Russell Kirk goes to great lengths to make the point that at heart human beings are all too ready to be corrupted — they have "a proclivity toward violence and sin." This original sin thesis simply made no sense to me. To think of infants as inherently sinful, leaning toward evil rather than having the option to turn out good or bad was, as far as I could understand it, a monumental injustice.

Subsequent reading in conservative literature — both contemporary and ancient — confirmed my growing suspicion that the conservatives do not speak for the unique essence of the American polity. They would like to appropriate it — they would like to tell us that America's is a conservative culture, that it follows Edmund Burke rather than John Locke. Willmoore Kendall tried in vain to convince us all of this, as have Irving Kristol, Martin Diamond, Walter Berns, and George Will. This is not unlike the attempts of such democratic socialists as Michael Harrington to graft their socialist agenda onto the American experience, saying that they are the true children of the American Revolution. It is an understandable turf fight — America's reputation with the ordinary people of the world is so well established that everyone would like to associate his or her agenda with its image.

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Recently a young student from Pecs, Hungary, visited with my family. I explained to her how Hungarians viewed America back in Budapest during the reign of Stalin and Rakosi. I said we all looked to America as the bastion of individual liberty, as the culture that gave the greatest practical expression to the most radical, revolutionary ideals yet introduced into human political thought: that each person is a moral sovereign, that each can be good or bad largely as a function of his or her choice. Books by Mark Twain, Zane Grey, Max Brand, and others with greater or more humble reputations attested to this image, and we believed them.

This 21-year-old woman, reared in Marxist-Leninist elementary, secondary, and undergraduate schools, looked at me and said, without batting an eye: "But that is exactly what we now think about the United States of America. And we are stunned to find that American intellectuals [she is now an exchange student here] have so much resentment against just this element of their own culture."

Marxists Have It Right. Such American intellectuals include on the right, George Will and others I have already mentioned, and, on the left, John Kenneth Galbraith, Robert Heilbroner, and Robert Lekachman. They all find it impossible to accept that they live in a culture that has distinguished itself to the world by virtue of its libertarian components — not by virtue of its emphasis on order, riches, traditionalism, Judeo-Christianity, and other tangential matters.

Indeed, the Marxists have it right: this is the quintessential bourgeois society, and the world admires it, but they detest it. Marxists join forces with conservatives on this score. In the publication *University Bookman* we find this thesis openly admitted. One article not long ago proudly quotes Charles Baudelaire, along with Marx and Engels, denouncing the bourgeoisie in favor of either some implausible universal "aristocracy" (as in communism) or the old line, natural "aristocracy" (as in feudalism). Both these conservatives and the Marxists yearn for a life of pure contemplation, of a fixed and coercive community, never mind what the various members of the community want.

There is no doubt that the term libertarian is used by many people, some of them with views it would be impossible to render plausible, let alone sound. The same is true of conservatives, democrats, liberals, socialists, communists, Christians, Jews, or advocates of any other doctrine espoused by the mind of human beings. By not relating any of the actual views of libertarians, it is easy to unleash wild indictments.

Notable Conservative Diatribes. But due process is not simply the province of just law. It is also the province of just discourse. In an indictment, the onus of proof lies with the prosecution. And there is no adherence to such a principle of due process in some notable conservative diatribes unleashed against libertarianism.

Some conservatives attack libertarians and libertarianism in a most unscholarly, unjust fashion. And some of the same, sadly, enjoy the utmost respect in conservative circles. When persons who attack a viewpoint with no mention of whom they are talking about, with no reference to any of the major works (but only to some popularized, vulgar statement by a minor figure), with no quotes to show what actually is believed, and with polemics heaped upon vitriol and venom, they simply cannot be dealt with in a

conscientious fashion, respectfully. There can be no honest attempt to discuss such treatments of even the most ludicrous views. It is better, then, to be constructive in one's discussion. There is much to be said about libertarianism, and we might learn something from saying even a little bit that is informative rather than trying to cope with unjustly disdainful and hostile smears.

A Political Doctrine. First of all, libertarianism is a political doctrine — a position on what the central legal standards of a political community ought to be for human beings. This doctrine has been defended from a variety of philosophical sources, from as long ago as the writings of Alcibiades to as recently as the works of Ayn Rand, David Friedman, Murray Rothbard, Robert Nozick, Eric Mack, John Hospers, Fred D. Miller, Jr., and others, including myself. This is no different from the situation in which other political doctrines find themselves. Communism, socialism, republicanism, democracy, theocracy, and all the rest enjoy the good or bad fortune — usually a combination of both — of mixed support.

Libertarianism can be defended from the philosophical/ethical stance of, for example, utilitarianism, Kantianism, Aristotelianism, Lockeanism, intuitionism, positivism, or evolutionism. All these philosophical/ethical stances vie for a chance to guard the liberty of the individual, giving a great variety of reasons why the protection of this liberty is of great worth, importance, or practical usefulness.

I happen to be one of those libertarians — that is, one of those persons who upholds the natural right to individual life, liberty, and property as the prime value of a human community as such — who thinks that the moral nature of human life requires that men and women be fully protected in society in their chance to face up to their responsibility to make the innumerable choices about their lives. I happen to think that this objective, to protect what Robert Nozick calls the "moral space" of every individual, is best served by the libertarian polity. I also think that much else that is of value to human life and culture would be well served — never, of course, guaranteed — if this objective were attained.

Individual Moral Sovereignty. In other words, my reason for being a libertarian is that there is an ontological fact that libertarianism expresses in the political realm, namely, the fact of the moral nature of a human being. We are all the kind of beings for whom action is a matter of choice. And our actions can be good or evil. Our central task is to strive to do good — which is to say, to realize our human nature as fully as possible in the circumstances of our lives. And only a free society — one that protects and maintains the institutions fostering individual moral sovereignty (such as the law that spells out the right to private property for the age in which we live) — can hope to secure this objective.

I do not speak for all libertarians. Others think that a healthy dosage of moral skepticism justifies the paramount place individual liberty ought to have in a human community — Milton Friedman and F.A. Hayek seem to agree on this matter, as do many who defend libertarian ideas from an economic perspective. Some think that the general welfare — a utilitarian objective — is best served if men and women are fully protected in their liberty. Others find it intuitively obvious that human beings ought to enjoy full freedom. Yet others see that the Christian virtues cannot be fully exercised unless human beings are free — I

believe Frank S. Meyer held this view. (This is why he was friend to both Murray Rothbard and Bill Buckley.)

I would argue, of course, that the defense of liberty, as I conceive of it, is sound, while the other approaches lack something important, namely, tying the right to liberty to a firm ontology of morals. I would also argue that, from the perspective that I hold, the government of a good human community would indeed have what might best be construed as a Lockean libertarian form. It would be a natural feature of a good human community, not some necessary evil. But it would be confined to doing the job of securing the protection and preservation of the basic, natural rights of individual human beings. Accordingly, such a government would have a strictly limited scope, though not necessarily a limited size: the task of securing *bona fide* justice can be a demanding one for a large community, so size is not the issue.

Defense Against Foreign Aggressors. Similarly, as to foreign entanglements, a government along libertarian lines would concern itself with the defense of its citizens' rights from foreign aggressors. It would prepare itself for any possible attack or incursion, just as the police of such a community, at the various levels of government, would prepare to cope with domestic aggression. And as such, government would be doing what it ought to do naturally for the community that it is supposed to serve with its unique professional expertise.

Now some libertarians call themselves anarchists. Yet they are not anarchists in the sense that they deny a natural place for law in the community. They merely wish to distinguish themselves from the tradition of statism wherein government has a paternal rather than professional position in the community. Murray Rothbard's anarchism is entirely mischaracterized if assessed as a position advocating the destruction of the institutions of law and justice. Indeed, Dr. Rothbard has always favored such institutions, simply under a different name. I disagree with some of his ideas, but that is not the issue. Rothbardians are a serious branch of an important school of political thought.

Libelous Charges. As to the alleged libertinism of libertarians, let me say that the prosecution has made no case for this libelous charge. There are no arguments at all, merely allegations, innuendoes, and insinuations. But just in case some find that charges by certain eminent conservative figures must somehow carry conviction — never mind that no case is made to back those charges — let us address the issue for a moment.

The doctrine that freedom — or rather the right to individual liberty — is the central political value in a human community can, of course, serve some disingenuous, discreditable, even evil purpose. Take for example, the doctrine of our Constitution that comes perhaps closest to the libertarian ideal, the First Amendment's unequivocal endorsement of the right to free speech and freedom of worship. Now there is no doubt that, when men and women are protected in the liberty to speak or write or worship, they can speak, write, or worship badly, wrongly, erroneously. As John Milton said,

If every action which is good in man at ripe years were to be under pittance, prescription, and compulsion, what were virtue but a name,

what praise could be then due to well doing, what gramercy to lie sober, just or continent?

Much that is Evil Must Remain Protected. The libertarian revises this by changing "every" to "any," and leaves for public administration only those concerns that involve all citizens as citizens — not as parents, friends, consumers, producers, artists, and scientists. In light of this, of course, the libertarian recognizes that within his policy much that is evil will have to remain protected from suppression — just as the defender of free speech and worship realizes that the yellow journalism found in many tabloids and the televangelism practice of some corrupt preachers is due protection.

Any political movement that proclaims itself in favor of liberty will attract a great variety of human beings, sometimes, indeed, the wretched of the earth — as the U.S. did when it became known that its system of government was the most protective of individual liberty on the globe. If certain conservatives do not understand why some libertarians are "peculiar people," they confess by this a lack of understanding and a shallow knowledge of American history.

Why indeed did America attract such peculiar people throughout its history — and why does it still? Why do European elites still look askance at American culture — with its Gong Shows, hog calling contests, ghostologists, collectors of Edsels, Vanna Whites, and indeed some of its more eccentric conservative luminaries? Because they find us peculiar. Our presidents can be rather quaint — with wives who fancy astrology, with a penchant for driving through the countryside at 95 miles per hour, with a hobby that calls at every port for 18 holes of golf.

Open to Life as It Is. Indeed, America is peculiar just the way libertarianism is: it is open to human life as it is, even when it may be clear enough to many that there is a better way to be. So long as borders are maintained between persons, they are not prevented from being peculiar, even libertine, albeit outside of politics libertarians can and do contribute to remedying such matters. But just as libertarians have banked on the overall advantage of a free people, so has America largely demonstrated this idea, thought not with the determination the libertarian would insist upon. Furthermore, certain widely circulated conservative writings, with some sporadic comments on the topic, are indeed wrong about the conception of human nature that prevails among libertarians: they do not think human beings are automatically good. But neither do they think that Adam's or anyone else's fall in the past necessarily taints the rest of humanity. Human beings are born guiltless, yes, and they can become good or bad or something in between. There are no guarantees.

Comparing libertarians to communists is, indeed, a personal insult to me, having risked my life at an early age to escape communism to head for a free country. Indeed, if we are to discuss that topic at all, I agree with Stephen Tonsor who argued not long ago that collectivism has conservative origins. I trace it all the way back to Plato and thus find solace in Aristotle, who was far more of an individualist, for his time, than was his teacher.

Some conservatives dislike libertarians because they actually dislike philosophy as such. Note that there are virtually no conservative philosophers, and understandably so. Many notable conservatives find philosophizing a sign of humanistic arrogance. They distrust the

individual human mind. They think it is an affront to God or Society or the impersonal wisdom of History to think up answers to questions that plague us. They find it annoying that some libertarians, who are considered closet "rationalists" by conservatives, dare to embark on understanding and coping with reality.

Yet what do conservatives offer as an alternative? Tradition. But what is tradition? It is the accumulated — tried and accepted — thought produced by our fellow human beings in the past. So if they had the temerity to think up ideas that we ought to respect, why may we not do the same?

Libertarianism Deserves Respect. There is no time here to deal with all the issues some conservatives might allude to in belittling libertarians. Some resort to the most uncivilized approach to dealing with libertarian adversaries — calling them peculiar, libertine, doctrinaire, humorless, self-righteous, badly schooled, and dull. But there are others who pay more heed to substance — indeed, judging by some of the publications at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, there are many who leave name calling to drunks at the carnival and to the cruder Marxist ideologues. (If one is interested in a reasonably good collection of exchanges on conservatism and libertarianism, see George Carey, ed., *Freedom and Virtue: The Conservative/Libertarian Debate* [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984]. For my discussion of conservatism vs. libertarianism, which has been conveniently ignored in a recent conservative lambaste of libertarianism, see *Modern Age*, Winters 1980 and 1982.)

Libertarianism is a political doctrine, as is socialism. It tries, at its best, to answer the political questions of human beings, questions raised in the effort to organize community life for a purposive, moral being. I think libertarianism thus deserves respect even from adversaries. I am sorry that conservatism is given voice in some important circles to those who find very distasteful what is perhaps most worthy of conserving in the American political legacy, the principle of the right to individual sovereignty. I am sorry mainly as a citizen, who chose this culture primarily because of its libertarian elements. I also disapprove, of course, on the philosophical grounds alluded to above.

