

Review Essay: Brian Doherty's *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement*, Paul Starr's *Freedom's Power: The History and Promise of Liberalism*, and Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr.'s *The Decline of American Liberalism*

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1. Introduction

All three of the books under review are (in some sense) recently published histories of liberalism, describing the transformation of classical liberalism between the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries.¹ Doherty's and Starr's books are somewhat triumphalist in spirit, recounting classical liberalism's evolution into something new and better. Ekirch's book is more pessimistic, describing classical liberalism's devolution into illiberalism. All three are "recently published" only in the academic reviewer's sense, the first two having made a splash in their initial reviewing cycle in 2007, the third being a 2009 re-issue of an old classic. Though already widely discussed, they are, I think, worth a fresh look in comparative perspective for the light they shed on liberalism, and on liberty.

2. Doherty's *Radicals for Capitalism*

Brian Doherty's *Radicals for Capitalism* pretty much delivers what its subtitle says it will: a freewheeling history of the modern American libertarian movement. Freewheeling as it is, Doherty's history has two definite strands, one intellectual, and one institutional.

¹ Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007); Paul Starr, *Freedom's Power: The History and Promise of Liberalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr., *The Decline of American Liberalism*, with a new foreword by Robert Higgs (Oakland, CA: Independent Institute, 2009). Starr's book was first published in 2007 with a different subtitle.

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The intellectual history is a story of the development and radicalization of classical liberalism. “The libertarian vision is all in Jefferson,” Doherty writes:

Read your Declaration of Independence: We are all created equal; no one ought to have any special rights and privileges in social relations with other men. We have, inherently, certain rights—to our life, to our freedom, to do what we please in order to find happiness. Government has one purpose: to help us protect those rights. And if it doesn't do that, then it has to go, by any means necessary. (p. 21)

Jefferson was, of course, preceded in this vision by Locke, and exceeded in it by his contemporary Paine. On Doherty's reading, classical liberalism then found further elaboration in the work of John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and the classical economists, as well as in the polemics and theorizing of the radical American individualists of the mid- to late-nineteenth century (William Lloyd Garrison, Lysander Spooner, William Graham Sumner). By the dawn of the twentieth century, however, and certainly by the end of the First World War, classical liberalism seemed an embarrassing anachronism with little to say of relevance to the problems of its time. The Depression confirmed the sense of failure, and the rise of the New Deal seemed to provide the death blow. It fell to the eccentric writers of the American “Old Right”—Albert Jay Nock, John Flynn, Rose Wilder Lane, Isabel Paterson, H. L. Mencken—to defend (eccentric versions of) classical liberalism in its darkest hour, and to set the stage for what Doherty regards as libertarianism proper.

Though a precise date would be misleading, what Doherty calls “modern American libertarianism” effectively comes into existence with World War II, in part as a more sophisticated continuation of the Old Right's resistance to the New Deal, and in part as a response to the evils of fascism and communism. What characterizes this modern libertarianism is a distinctive radicalization of classical liberalism, reconceived for the complexities of modern life. The central libertarian figures in *Radicals* are Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, Ayn Rand, Murray Rothbard, and Milton Friedman. Doherty gives us biographical sketches of each of them, along with detailed accounts of their intellectual development, their contemporary standing in American intellectual life, and the twists and turns on their thought offered by their contemporary followers.

The book's institutional history is a chronicling, sometimes problematically reminiscent of Monty Python's “Life of Brian,” of attempts to put libertarian ideas into practice over the last six or seven decades. It's a dizzying list of names, factions, and squabbles, but Doherty offers a generally well-researched and informative account of the circumstances giving rise to the most important activist efforts, as well as the principals' sources of

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funding, their aims, their actions, the in-fighting that arose during their careers, and the outcomes of their efforts. This aspect of the book seems to have bored non-libertarians to tears,² but is must-reading for anyone sympathetic to libertarianism, and is of value to anyone interested in the history of American political thought, or the sociology of the American right.

There is a lot to like about Doherty's book, and I had a lot of fun reading it. For one thing, Doherty's knowledge of the subject is encyclopedic. He seems to have read almost everything ever written about libertarianism—pro and con, momentous and trivial—and found a way of putting it into the book. At the simplest level, then, the book is an unequalled bibliographical resource, an entertaining chronicle of tidbits and anecdotes, and a useful (if overly detailed) synopsis of the story of the libertarian movement. But there are some deeper contributions here as well.

One of them is epistemological. If we step back from the details of Doherty's narrative, it becomes clear that four ideological disputes have characterized libertarian thought from its very beginnings. A first is whether the libertarian conception of rights leads to limited government or to anarchy. A second is whether the defense of liberty ought to be carried on in narrowly political terms, or whether it requires allegiance to a broader philosophical or cultural outlook. A third issue concerns the relationship between ideological purity and political efficacy. In other words, should libertarians be uncompromising sticklers for principle, or should they be open to compromise, and if so, of what sort? A fourth issue concerns foreign policy. Does the concept of a libertarian foreign policy make sense? If so, what form should it take? How should libertarians think about warfare?

Doherty usefully puts these questions in historical context, and in so doing, shows us the steps by which the contemporary party lines on them first formed and hardened. We thereby get to see the experiences, evidence, and arguments that led people to reach the conclusions they reached, and induced them to formulate the positions to which we're now heir. In some cases, the perspective of distance allows us to look at the old debates dispassionately enough to see who committed which fallacies or errors, and which interlocutors talked past one another or past the issues themselves. Given how often debates about these issues get stuck in a rut, that is a real contribution, and one potentially facilitative of intellectual progress in the here and now.

A second contribution is moral. Though *Radicals* devotes inordinate space to the “freak show” elements of libertarianism, the book also showcases men and women who, whatever their flaws, deserve more moral credit than they ever get from mainstream commentators. I was particularly impressed by

² See, e. g., David Leonhardt's review, “Free for All,” *The New York Times*, April 1, 2007.

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the tenacity, acuity, and courage of nine individuals discussed in *Radicals*: Ludwig von Mises, Isabel Paterson, Leonard Read, William Mullendore, Ayn Rand, Thomas Szasz, Richard Fink, Paul Jacob, and John Mackey. All nine took positions far outside of the mainstream of American political thought and practice, paying the price for it in the way of ridicule, intimidation, and marginalization, but all nine had the foresight to stick to their guns—to their benefit and ours.³ In reading *Radicals*, it occurred to me that I had myself subconsciously dismissed Thomas Szasz's views on the basis of totally unreflective prejudices; Doherty's brief account of Szasz's thought convinced me that I was wrong. Multiply my anti-Szasz dogmatism by the millions and you get some attenuated sense of the intellectual inertia Doherty's libertarians have had to confront.

A third contribution is historical: *Radicals* draws salutary attention to now-forgotten episodes of American history that ought more assiduously to be remembered. Who today remembers or wants to talk about Hollywood's mid-century apologetics for Stalin (pp. 187-89), the depredations of the Buchanan Commission (pp. 195-98), the merits and contemporary relevance of the Bricker Amendment (p. 258), the libertarian role in the abolition of conscription (p. 303), the free-speech implications of *Buckley vs. Valeo* (p. 398), or the track record of urban renewal (p. 448)? Centrist liberals, in particular, might want to check some of their premises on these issues, having been on the wrong side of history in every one of these cases.

A fourth and somewhat unwitting contribution is the flip side of the previous two. Though he makes less of it than he might have, Doherty also shows us that the libertarian movement has had a dark side from its very beginnings. It is hard not to cringe at libertarian flirtations with neo-Confederate versions of states' rights, or at their morally equivalent flirtations with the New Left. Milton Friedman's apparent co-optation by the Pinochet regime still seems problematic, as does the embarrassing weakness of Ronald Reagan's dealings with such right-wing regimes as Zia-ul-Haq's Pakistan and *apartheid* South Africa (unmentioned by Doherty in the generally admiring pages he devotes to Reagan).⁴ Murray Rothbard provides decades' worth of moral insanity on his own, with his praise for Joseph McCarthy and Strom Thurmond in one decade and for Black Power in the next (pp. 245, 254-56, 341); his apologetics for the Soviet Union (p. 383); his rejection of the rights of children (p. 560); his radical re-definition of the concept of assault (p. 559);

³ My use of the past perfect is a bit misleading here, since Mackey's is a current case with contemporary consequences. See the interview with Mackey by Matt Welch and Nick Gillespie in "Whole Foods Health Care," *Reason* (January 2010).

⁴ Doherty elsewhere discusses Friedman and Pinochet; see "The Economist and the Dictator," *Reason Online* (December 15, 2006).

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and his insouciant avowal of the thesis that in the absence of plaintiffs against them, violent criminals ought to be allowed to go unprosecuted for their crimes (pp. 559-60). Over and above this one can't help noticing the general decadence and eccentricity of the libertarian movement as a whole. I give Doherty credit for presenting the uglier sides of the movement's history, but can't agree with the somewhat cavalier way in which he presents it.⁵ After a while the malfeasances cease to be amusing, and start to get scary.

Though I found Doherty's book likeable and informative, I have to confess to some philosophical misgivings, some of them at odds with his project as such. In a much derided but little discussed essay (badly misinterpreted by Doherty, pp. 438-40), the Objectivist writer Peter Schwartz once notoriously described libertarianism as a "perversion of liberty."⁶ Taking Rothbard's libertarianism as paradigmatic of libertarianism as such, Schwartz argued that since Rothbard's libertarianism was nihilistic, nihilism was the defining essence of libertarianism. Canvassing libertarian writing of the 1970s and 1980s, Schwartz found what he took to be ample confirmatory evidence for his thesis, and in consequence, anathematized libertarianism for all time.

I don't entirely agree with Schwartz, but I found it useful to read his essay while reading Doherty's book, if only because doing so brought out Doherty's tendency to go to the opposite extreme. Where Schwartz insisted that libertarianism was a single unified doctrine with an essence identifiable via the writings of a single author, Doherty seems content with the thought that libertarianism is whatever libertarians say it is (p. 19). This cheerfully nominalistic attitude may come across as pleasingly inclusive to some—no one is allowed the final say about the identity of libertarianism, not even its chief historian⁷—but it leads to some problems.

One widely noted problem is that Doherty has given us a 741-page history that steadfastly refuses to distinguish the significant from the insignificant. This leads to tediously long discussions of ephemeral topics, and problematically brief discussions of important ones. Should a book on libertarianism really devote more space to the antics of Karl Hess than to the combined scholarly and analytic efforts of the Institute for Humane Studies

⁵ Leonhardt makes the same criticism in "Free for All," but ignores the second and third contributions I note above.

⁶ Peter Schwartz, "Libertarianism: The Perversion of Liberty," in Ayn Rand, *The Voice of Reason: Essays in Objectivist Thought*, ed. Leonard Peikoff (New York: New American Library, 1988), pp. 311-33.

⁷ Actually, this is a bit misleading, as Doherty *agrees* with Schwartz in regarding Rothbard as the paradigmatic libertarian (p. 13), and literally gives Rothbard the book's last word (p. 619).

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and Mercatus Center? Is Jerome Tuccille's *It Usually Begins With Ayn Rand* (five index entries) really more important than David Kelley's *Truth and Toleration* (none)? Does any serious person have reason to care about the crackpot musings of Andrew Joseph Galambos (pp. 323-26, 401, 474), the Discordian political "theorizing" of Kerry Thornley (pp. 265, 328, 522), or the political fortunes of Howard Stern (pp. 516-17)?

At a deeper level, the failure to define "libertarianism" raises a question that Doherty doesn't address: How can one write a history of an ideological movement without a precise sense of its identity? In lieu of an answer to that question, Doherty uncritically accepts a version of what is perhaps the only doctrine shared in common by Murray Rothbard and John Rawls: the thesis of the overlapping consensus. The idea here is that exponents of divergent and incommensurable moral perspectives can achieve a consensus on political questions—on liberty, say—by focusing on the agreements that they happen to have despite the disagreements that divide them. "Citizens have conflicting religious, philosophical, and moral views," Rawls writes, "and so they affirm [a common] political conception from within different and opposing comprehensive doctrines, and so, in part at least, for different reasons."⁸ Rothbard puts the point this way:

As a political theory, Libertarianism is a coalition of adherents from all manner of philosophic (or nonphilosophic) positions: including emotivism, hedonism, Kantian *a priorism*, and many others. My own position grounds Libertarianism on a natural rights theory embedded in a wider system of Aristotelian-Lockean natural law and a realist ontology and metaphysics. But although those of us taking this position believe that only it provides a satisfactory groundwork and basis for individual liberty, this is an argument within the Libertarian camp about the proper basis and ground of Libertarianism rather than about the doctrine itself.⁹

Both Rawls and Rothbard assume that the content of a doctrine can be detached from its justification. If I endorse liberty on, say, Aristotelian-

⁸ John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001), p. 32. See also John Rawls, "The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus," in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), ch. 20; and John Rawls, "The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus," in John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), Lecture 4.

⁹ Murray Rothbard, "Frank S. Meyer: The Fusionist as Libertarian Manqué," *Modern Age* 25, no. 4 (Fall 1981), p. 355.

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Lockean grounds and you endorse it on, say, emotivist grounds, we need not worry about the justificatory questions that divide us; we ought instead to focus on the substantive agreement that unites us. We can (on this view) still agree in endorsing liberty while disagreeing about its justification.

Unfortunately, this “agreement” is an illusion. If you are an emotivist and I am an Aristotelian, we don’t just disagree about the “proper basis” of a doctrine on which we otherwise agree. We disagree about the relationship between doctrines and reality as such. In that case, we disagree about the *reality* denoted by the term “liberty.” If so, our supposed “agreement” about liberty conceals fundamental disagreement about it, and collapses into purely verbal formulas to which we give incompatible meanings. And what is true of the disagreement between Aristotelians and emotivists is, I suspect, also true of the other normative disagreements that divide “libertarians.” Utilitarians, Kantians, Hayekians, and Objectivists may all profess a love of “liberty,” but they surely do not mean the same thing by it.

This problem has stark implications for Doherty’s book. The five libertarians at the heart of *Radicals* adopt wildly divergent, incompatible positions on questions of epistemology, ethics, and politics. So what exactly do all five have in common that entitles all of them to be called “libertarians”? Presumably, they share a common commitment to liberty. But is it the same commitment? Is it a commitment to the same thing? Doherty writes as though these questions didn’t much matter. The five writers’ theoretical commitments may differ, he implies, but if so, surely the five of them can achieve some approximation to an overlapping consensus that justifies our calling them “libertarians” despite that.

Can they? To answer that question, we’d need to compare what each author says about liberty with the comparable claims of the others. And that brings us to a strange anomaly in *Radicals*. While it spends hundreds of pages discussing the views of its protagonists, it devotes surprisingly little space to their claims about the nature of liberty. The reader could get through the book without ever learning how Mises, Rand, Rothbard, and Friedman defined “liberty,” what they excluded from those definitions and why, and how each author’s definition compares with those of the others.¹⁰ This is only partly Doherty’s fault, however, for the fact is, Hayek aside, none of the authors have *themselves* offered sustained discussions of the nature of liberty. It’s an amazing fact that the *nature of liberty* is one of the least-discussed topics in what libertarians like to call “the literature of liberty.” But if so, the assumption that all five of Doherty’s protagonists must be agreeing with one

¹⁰ Hayek is a partial exception (pp. 219-22, 306), but Hayek is the least libertarian of the book’s five protagonists.

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another about liberty is unjustified—particularly so if one of them, Rand, explicitly insisted that she was disagreeing with the others.

Mention of Rand brings me to my final complaint about Doherty's book, namely, his treatment of Rand's Objectivism. I give Doherty credit for his praise of Rand, and for the parts of his discussion that do genuinely convey what's important about her work. But on the whole, Doherty's discussion of Rand is chatty and superficial in ways that contrast conspicuously with the substantive and issues-based approach he takes in his discussions of Rothbard, Mises, Hayek, Friedman, and others. Too much of his discussion of Rand consists of gossip and rumor-mongering, too little is directly focused on her ideas, and where he does focus on the ideas, he is too quick to dismiss claims that he has scarcely bothered to explain.¹¹ No serious

¹¹ Though Doherty is by turns respectful of and snarky about Rand, Rand-hating reviewers have had a field day with his book, exploiting the gossip in it to generate—or confabulate—mythologies expressing their prejudices. A typical example is Jonah Goldberg's review: "In some cases, as with the chapter dealing with Rand, one could argue that Doherty lets the damning facts speak for themselves" ("Live Free or Else!" *National Review* [May 24, 2007]). Unfortunately, the "facts" in Doherty's account don't speak for themselves, chiefly because they lack a clear title to being factual. Much of Doherty's account attempts to recreate the atmosphere of the early Objectivist movement, a daunting task for an outsider under the best of circumstances, but close to impossible under current circumstances. Doherty relies for much of his account on the testimony of disgruntled insiders, some named (Barbara and Nathaniel Branden, Robert Hessen, Joan Kennedy Taylor, Murray Rothbard) and some anonymous, but doesn't seem to have interviewed any of the Rand-positive people from the same milieu. Without even disputing the disgruntled insiders' claims, it ought to be obvious that one cannot recreate the atmosphere of highly personal, heated, and controversial events five decades in the past without interviewing people who have different recollections of the same events. No such testimony appears in Doherty's book, who seems to regard it as axiomatic that the early Objectivist movement is whatever his interviewees say about it. I see no reason to accept this assumption.

A different sort of example comes by way of Kay Hymowitz's review of *Radicals* in *Commentary*, according to which "Ayn Rand was predictably wary of kinship ties and, like radical feminists, saw the family as a soul killing prison" ("Freedom Fetishists," *Commentary* [September 2007]). As common experience suggests, some families can be soul-killing prisons, but nowhere does Rand suggest that the family as such is one. I asked Hymowitz by email for the textual evidence in Rand's works for her claim about Rand; she had none. The source for her claim appears to be an article by the libertarian journalist Cathy Young, which asserts: "In her 1964 *Playboy* interview, Rand flatly declared that it was 'immoral' to place family ties and friendship over productive work; in her fiction, family life is depicted as a stifling, soul-killing, mainly feminine swamp" ("Ayn Rand at 100," *Reason* [March 2005]). The similarities of wording suggest that Hymowitz has merely appropriated and re-written Young's claim, passing it off as her own. In any case, both Young's and Hymowitz's claims are misrepresentations. For one thing, Rand's fictional depiction of

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Objectivist would regard his account as fair or accurate, and no one previously unfamiliar with Objectivism could come, by Doherty's account, to see what it is that has convinced anyone of its truth. I grant that the task of writing a primer on Objectivism is a difficult one—there really is no better guide to Objectivism than Ayn Rand—but the task is inevitably overcomplicated by a book, like Doherty's, that so systematically privileges gossip over doctrine, and so quickly brushes aside the very topics that Rand regarded as fundamental.

Oddly, then, though I liked *Radicals*, I often found it a frustrating book to read. My hunch is that the book will remain of enduring interest to libertarians and their fellow travelers, but have little impact outside of that relatively closed circle. For non-libertarians, *Radicals* will likely confirm their sense that libertarianism is an interesting anomaly on the American political scene—intriguingly consistent in the pursuit of liberty, but ultimately too wacky to be taken seriously.

3. Starr's *Freedom's Power*

Paul Starr's *Freedom's Power* (hereafter *FP*) is at once remarkably like and radically unlike *Radicals*. It begins, like *Radicals*, with an appeal to the preamble of the Declaration of Independence and with the Lockean-Jeffersonian vision that animates it:

Liberalism is deeply rooted in American soil, so much so, in fact, that in the years after World War II many historians and social scientists regarded the liberal project and the American civic creed as more or less identical. The two share the same aspirations. The proposition that each of us has a right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" remains as good a definition as anyone has ever come up with of liberalism's first principle and America's historic promise. For some time, however, contemporary liberalism has been under political siege in the United States, and liberal ideas have lost the high ground they once commanded in moral argument and public life. (p. 1)

Given this, Starr's aim in *FP* is to restore to liberals what he claims that they've lost. Like *Radicals*, *FP* is an intellectual and institutional history—"a

families cannot be equated with her considered view of the family as such. Second, both Young and Hymowitz ignore Rand's positive remarks on parenting in the very interview to which Young alludes. Third, Young's claims about Rand's fiction are themselves highly disputable: if couples count as families (and why shouldn't they?), Rand's depictions of the family are highly *positive*. The failures of research, reading comprehension, and intellectual honesty involved here strike me as downright pathetic.

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historical interpretation of the liberal project” (p. ix)—and like *Radicals*, the story it tells is one about the interface of ideas and institutions in recent Anglo-American history (though with far greater attention to England than Doherty attempts). Like Doherty, Starr begins his history by discussing the classical liberals, and traces the evolution of their doctrines across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with a view to showing how those ideas were updated in theory and practice to better fit the circumstances and moral conceptions of modern life. And like *Radicals*, *FP* is committed to the thesis that political history is in some sense structured by intellectual history without being literally reducible to it; contrary to both Marxist determinism and Machiavellian cynicism, we understand politics best in Aristotelian fashion by studying the interface of normative principles and contingent events as embodied by constitutions (pp. 29-32).

But *FP* is, for all those similarities, a strikingly different sort of book than *Radicals*, and to my mind a much better one. Some of this is a function of its purely formal virtues. The book is written with erudition and clarity, and contrary to some of its critics, does a very good job at integrating the theoretical and historical parts of the story it tells. Unlike *Radicals*, it is an intensely serious book, written with a refreshing moral passion. It’s also ruthlessly single-minded. Unlike Doherty, Starr wastes no space on the merely amusing or frivolous; he has a good sense of the difference between the essential and the dispensable. Perhaps the explanation for all of this is that, unlike *Radicals*, *FP* is a book with a well-defined doctrinal agenda, and a thesis formulated to serve it; the book is, Starr tells us, “a defense of the modern and egalitarian form” of liberalism, and a “rebuttal” of its conservative critics (pp. ix, x). (Starr refers to this egalitarian form of liberalism as “democratic liberalism.”) On this view, we might say, modern history has been an experiment with a single central finding: Where “democratic liberalism” has flourished, so have freedom, justice, and prosperity; where that liberalism has been thwarted, those values have suffered. Whether one agrees or disagrees, one can’t help but admire the form and method of the argument.

What then is “democratic liberalism”? Ironically, despite Starr’s own call for “clarity about what liberalism stands for” (p. 12), he is no better at defining it than Doherty was at defining libertarianism. “Liberalism,” he tells us, “is notoriously difficult to define” (p. 1); echoing the “overlapping consensus” thesis discussed above, he canvasses a few definitions and concludes that “[l]iberals are defined more by their shared political principles than by agreement on the ultimate grounds on which those principles rest” (pp. 4, 237-38 n. 1). I’ve already explained why I think this gambit fails, and to the extent that Starr relies on it, his doing so muddies the waters. But he’s not *that* committed to it; contrary to his official view, his liberalism is defined

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both by a set of shared principles and by an implicit conception of the grounds for them.

Starr's conception of liberalism is rich and complicated, but I think it can be reduced to four central theses, each harking back in some way to the sort of liberalism historically developed by L. T. Hobhouse, and associated today with the work of Ronald Dworkin, William Galston, and Amy Gutmann.¹² A first thesis asserts that liberalism presupposes an objective conception of well-being and the virtues:

A liberal government, like any other, must operate on the basis of substantive values, not just in the criminal law but in every phase of its activities. . . . There are excellences and virtues that a liberal society must promote if it is to survive. Far from being silent on the good, liberalism is intensely concerned with it, though that concern is not always fully expressed or conveyed through the state. (pp. 176-77)

A second thesis asserts a commitment to an egalitarian conception of equal liberty as a necessary condition of well-being:

Liberalism regards the well-being of the least well-off as a central criterion for a just society, and it seeks to provide individuals with some degree of protection against risks beyond their control, but it accepts inequalities insofar as they are to everyone's long-run advantage and therefore aims for sustainable growth with widely shared gains. (pp. 148-49)

A third thesis, which supplies the book's title, holds that the promotion of equal freedom requires the sort of power that can only be supplied by a strong, albeit constitutionally limited, state. And a fourth thesis extends the preceding three into international affairs: A liberal state ought, compatibly with the requirements of equal freedom, to advance liberal values abroad. Sometimes that will require warfare in defense of liberty, but more often it will require the projection of so-called soft power and multilateral diplomacy.

The package certainly conveys the impression of overall coherence, and for the most part, Starr manages his case well. It's a tribute to *FP* that its conservative critics have done little damage to the book's main thesis. Indeed, most of them have been astonishingly concessionary, and equally unaware of what they've been conceding. As Wilfrid McClay puts the point in a putatively critical review in *Commentary*, "One of the oddest features of *Freedom's Power* is that almost any conservative can read large chunks of it

¹² See L. T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964 [1911]).

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and find little substance to disagree with.”¹³ If that’s so, it follows that the specifically conservative criticism of the book has been pretty insubstantial. But no self-respecting libertarian or Objectivist could get past p. 2 of the book without raising an eyebrow, or past p. 4 without settling in for a fight.

An initial weakness of *FP* is its virtual imprisonment by the conventional dichotomy between liberalism and conservatism. Though the book begins with a discussion of classical liberalism, Starr uses “classical liberal” throughout the book narrowly to denote the views held by the original classical liberals (e.g., Locke, Mill, the American Founders, etc.), freighting the term with all of the racist, sexist, and otherwise reactionary baggage associated with the most idiosyncratic features of their thought (pp. 79-82, 88-95, 98-99). He regards “modern democratic liberalism” as the sole heir to classical liberalism, giving it exclusive credit for its reform, but doesn’t allow for the possibility of a non-conservative, non-socialist, and non-democratic liberal aspirant to the same inheritance. The four references to libertarianism in the book all assimilate libertarianism to conservatism (pp. 20, 85, 123, 164), and the various references to “laissez faire” in *FP* merely repeat Hobhouse’s critique of the Manchester School.¹⁴ The book makes passing reference to Hayek and Friedman, but none at all to Mises, Rand, or Nozick. Dialectically speaking, then, Starr makes life relatively easy for himself: in assimilating libertarianism to conservatism and ignoring Objectivism altogether, he ignores the most fundamental challenges to his views. But there are challenges to be made.

Consider Starr’s interpretation of the principle of equal liberty. As we’ve seen, his view entails that the relatively disadvantaged have a claim on the labor and property of the advantaged to be advanced by the coercive powers of the state. A common criticism of this view, unacknowledged by Starr, asserts that it treats the advantaged as mere means to the welfare of the disadvantaged:

Seizing the results of someone’s labor is equivalent to seizing hours from him and directing him to carry on various activities. If people force you to do certain work, or unrewarded work, for a certain period of time, they decide what you are to do and what purposes your work is to serve apart from your decisions. This process

¹³ Wilfrid McClay, “The Right Left?” *Commentary* (May 2007). See also Peter Berkowitz, “Proudly Liberal,” *Policy Review* (April-May 2007). For a more contentious but still concessionary review, see Fred Siegel, “Blinded by the Left,” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* (Summer 2007). Starr responds at length to his critics on the book’s website, <http://www.freedomspower.com>.

¹⁴ Hobhouse, *Liberalism*, ch. 4.

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whereby they take this decision from you makes them a *part-owner* of you; it gives them a property right in you. . . . [Such] principles involve a shift from the classical liberals' notion of self-ownership to a notion of (partial) property rights in *other* people.¹⁵

Richard Arneson, among others, concedes this point in his defense of redistribution, and the late G. A. Cohen devoted a good part of his career to the task of rebutting it.¹⁶ Starr ignores it, and yet to a remarkable degree, he regards the promotion of equal freedom as the progressive appropriation of persons by persons,¹⁷ a claim that he justifies with the mantra-like assertion that “property has rights but brings obligations.” He seems to think it entirely obvious that what A gains by partially appropriating B counts as a net gain for both of them:

To paraphrase Hobhouse, it is just to tax B to help A because when the good of all concerned is considered, among whom B is one, there will be a net gain in the arrangement as compared with any alternative. (p. 102; see also pp. 18, 101, 103, 203)

It's not as obvious as Starr thinks. For starters, it's hardly obvious that B benefits from being appropriated by A. If not, there's no gain in the arrangement for B, or for anyone circumstanced like B. Neither is it obvious that it's *just* to appropriate persons. If not, then the proceeds of such an appropriation are ill-gotten gains. Now suppose (as Tara Smith argues)¹⁸ that ill-gotten gains are *not* beneficial to those who try to get them. In that case, there's no gain for A, either, or for those circumstanced like A. If the proposed taxation doesn't benefit A-type or B-type people, it is unclear whom it does benefit, or why there are no better alternatives to it. Where, then, is Starr's “net gain”? Contrary to Starr, economic growth and political meliorism

¹⁵ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 172.

¹⁶ See Richard Arneson, “Property Rights in Persons,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 9, no. 1 (1992), pp. 201-30; G. A. Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For a contemporary libertarian discussion, see Tom Palmer, “G. A. Cohen on Self-Ownership, Property, and Equality,” in *Realizing Freedom: Libertarian Theory, History, and Practice* (Washington: Cato Institute, 2009), ch. 6.

¹⁷ See *FP*, pp. 4, 76, 81, 87, 88, 93, 94-95, 100-6, 120, 129, 139-50, 165-75, 197, 198, 200, 221, 228-30, 234.

¹⁸ Tara Smith, *Viable Values: A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), pp. 167-74.

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are not obviously beneficial if gotten by methods that make property of persons—any more so than decreases in the crime rate would be self-evident progress if achieved by violations of procedural justice.

The preceding point about self-ownership obliges us to take a closer look at what Starr really means by “equal liberty.” Like Doherty, Starr offers no definition or analysis of liberty, but it’s useful to reflect on what he does say by way of an influential definition in an account close to his. Consider Dworkin’s view. According to Dworkin, “*liberty is the right to do what you want with the resources that are rightfully yours.*”¹⁹ If we apply this to Starr’s account, it follows that the advantaged suffer a drastic diminution of liberty: none of us is *ourselves* “rightfully ours” qua advantaged—at least not fully so, since others are free to appropriate us. We thus lack the liberty to do what we want with ourselves, and what we want with our labor, actions, or property. The disadvantaged, by contrast, are free to receive and use the proceeds of coercive redistribution—free, at any rate, unless they become advantaged. Then *they* become candidates for appropriation by those currently disadvantaged, and the cycle continues.

Starr writes as though each successive intensification of coercive redistribution—each attempt to take more from the advantaged and give more to the disadvantaged (or to more of the disadvantaged)—made everyone more free. Yet he ignores the fact that each such redistribution reduces what advantaged agents can regard as rightfully theirs. Crudely put, as the disadvantaged get stuff from the advantaged, the advantaged lose options for independent action; as the disadvantaged get enough stuff to count as advantaged, they too start to lose options for action so that the (currently) disadvantaged can get more stuff. One could only regard this as a net gain for freedom if one ignored the conflict between two incompatible kinds of freedom: (a) the freedom to act on those options you have when you fully own yourself, and (b) the freedom you have to act on those options you have when no one fully owns himself, but almost everyone owns some part of someone else.

Starr seems to suggest that the conflict between (a) and (b) can be averted by regarding “equality” and “liberty” as correlatives and interpreting the principle of equal liberty so that it integrates both without loss to either.²⁰

¹⁹ Ronald Dworkin, *Is Democracy Possible Here? Principles for a New Political Debate* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 69. Starr favorably cites Dworkin’s book in a somewhat different context (p. 238 n. 2). Unlike Dworkin, I use “freedom” and “liberty” interchangeably throughout to refer to what Dworkin calls “liberty.”

²⁰ *FP*, pp. 86, 87, 99, 118, 140, 197, 200. See also Starr’s response to the review by *The Economist* on the book’s website (April 27, 2008).

But that claim is a red herring. Let's grant that equality and liberty *are* correlatives, and that a defensible principle of equal liberty integrates them. The question is whether Starr has articulated such a principle. He has not. What he has done is to endorse something like (a) in contexts involving speech, sex, religious observance, and scientific inquiry, and something like (b) for economic life. He then implicitly regards the conjunction of (a) and (b) as a proxy for an interpretation of equal liberty. But (a) flatly *contradicts* (b). What needs an explanation is why (a) governs a few ad hoc slices of life, while (b) governs the rest. In the absence of an explanation, Starr cannot claim to have reconciled equality and liberty. What he's done is to sacrifice liberty in sense (a) to liberty in sense (b). He himself notices this on one isolated occasion (p. 103), but makes nothing of it. In fact, the concession signals a fundamental defect in his treatment of equal liberty.

This may all seem very abstract, but its consequences in liberal jurisprudence and policy have been quite vivid. Democratic liberalism claims that we have rights to receive goods, but also claims that we lack a comparable right to produce or keep them. The result is not an expansion of freedom, as Starr claims, but a kind of political schizophrenia. Thus democratic liberalism tells us that we have the "right to a decent home," but also tells us that no one has a right to keep the home he owns: a chain of liberal jurisprudence from *Parker vs. Berman* (1954) to *Kelo vs. New London* (2005) has legitimated the forcible expropriation and destruction of hundreds of thousands of homes under urban renewal, and ultimately led in jurisprudence to the outright nullification of private property rights.²¹ Democratic liberalism gives us the right to "fair competition" in business contexts where economies of scale might concentrate wealth, but it also imposes on us a legal apparatus that routinely applies vague and retroactive laws, that reverses the presumption of innocence in criminal trials, and that ascribes criminal liability to persons who play no causal role in bringing about the crimes for which they stand accused.²² In one breath democratic liberalism

²¹ This last claim may sound "extreme" to some, but the case for it is cogently laid out in Justice O'Connor's dissent in the *Kelo vs. New London* decision (2005). On urban renewal, see Martin Anderson's classic *The Federal Bulldozer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964). See also Richard Epstein, *Takings: Private Property and the Power of Eminent Domain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); Richard Epstein, *How Progressives Rewrote the Constitution* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2006); and James V. DeLong, *Property Matters: How Property Rights Are Under Assault—And Why You Should Care* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

²² On retroactivity in antitrust law, see Ayn Rand, "Antitrust: The Rule of Unreason," in *The Voice of Reason*, pp. 254-59. The other points are made in John Hasnas, *Trapped: When Acting Ethically Is Against the Law* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2006), ch. 4. Thanks to Carrie-Ann Biondi for bringing Hasnas's book to my attention.

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promises us “security” against risk via a “compact between generations”; in the next, it confesses that the “security” it offers is actuarially unsound, hence impossible to deliver.²³ Starr calls this the raising of “the equilibrium of power and liberty to a higher level” (p. 159). Considering his demotion of property rights to relative insignificance (p. 10), his conception of those rights as almost infinitely malleable (p. 71), and his deference to democratic majorities in economic matters (p. 162), I’m more inclined to call it a local train to totalitarianism.²⁴

I mentioned above that Starr takes the principle of equal liberty to require promotion by a strong, though constitutionally limited, state. One might think that despite the preceding criticisms, the commitment to constitutionalism ought to put to rest worries about totalitarianism. Indeed, Starr repeatedly insists that “freedom’s power” can only be realized if the state is limited in its functions. He spends a chapter criticizing socialism, giving democratic liberals the lion’s share of the credit for seeing its errors and correcting them.²⁵ He has praise for deregulation as well, giving democratic liberals credit for coming up with the idea and successfully putting it into practice (p. 158).

But despite the frequent allusions to “limits” on state power (which I tracked through the text), I didn’t find a single passage or combination of them that straightforwardly posed or answered the essential question: What is the function of the state, and what are its limits? Starr’s discussion of this topic is, with certain ad hoc exceptions (speech, sex, religion, science), vague to the point of vacuity or narrow to the point of irrelevance. The closest he comes to a view about the state’s *function* is a passage that suggests that the primary purpose of social policy is redistribution (p. 197)—but this articulates a power, not a limit. The closest he comes to a discussion of *limits* is a brief passage on the separation of powers, but this is a purely procedural principle that sets no substantive limits on state power (pp. 59-60). Despite this, Starr

²³ From “What Social Security Means To You,” Form SSA-7005-SM-SI (01/10), Social Security Administration.

²⁴ I borrow this metaphor from Ayn Rand’s title, “Censorship: Local and Express,” in Ayn Rand, *Philosophy: Who Needs It?* (New York: Signet, 1982). For further discussion, see Timothy Sandefur’s review of *The Dirty Dozen* in this issue.

²⁵ I found this claim more than a little puzzling. “The consequences of tightly coupling economics and politics,” Starr writes of socialist regimes, “were not immediately apparent” (p. 187). Not apparent to whom? Mises’s first discussion of the “consequences of tightly coupling economics and politics” dates to 1920, Rand’s to 1936. Both writers were ridiculed for decades by left-liberals for drawing undesired attention to the topic.

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insists that constitutional liberalism “imposed limits on state power” (p. 53): though the American constitution “magnified the powers of the state,” it also “clarified and codified the limitation of those powers” (p. 48). Ad hoc exceptions aside, I found no such clarification or codification in Starr’s discussion. He cites with apparent approval Alexander Hamilton’s claim from *Federalist* #31 that there are “no fixed limits” on the government’s power of taxation (p. 48), and asserts soon after that the “Constitution’s endowment of powers created an elastic state” without limits as such (p. 51).²⁶ Though Starr praises “the Madisonian view . . . that the Union ought to guarantee liberty all the way down” (p. 51), “all the way down” really seems to mean “part of the way down”: property rights get low priority, even when written into the Constitution and endorsed by Madison himself (p. 10).²⁷

This open-ended account of state power has problematic ramifications for Starr’s discussion of foreign policy, as well. Starr calls his conception of foreign policy “liberal internationalism,” broadly defined as the rejection of pacifism and imperialism, and the promotion in international contexts of human rights, free trade, and the defense of liberal governments against anti-liberal threats to them (pp. 112-15, 127-38). Fleshing this out a bit, he endorses Woodrow Wilson’s conception of national self-determination as expressed in the Fourteen Points (p. 115); “containment” as formulated by George Kennan and implemented by the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan (pp. 130-38), and “multilateralism” of the sort associated with the League of Nations and the U.N., understood less in terms of the actual working of these institutions than with the ideals motivating their creation (p. 116).

Some of what Starr says here is reasonable. He is right in a broad way about what we should want to achieve in our foreign policy, and critical both of the excessive militarism of the right and the appeasement-propensities of the left. But little of what he says about this is unique to democratic liberalism as he conceives of it; libertarians have been defending views like his for decades. On the other hand, the differences between liberal and libertarian/Objectivist internationalisms are perhaps as instructive as the similarities, especially with respect to warfare. The Objectivist position holds that warfare is justified exclusively as a matter of self-defense. Force-initiations by external powers demand a retaliatory response, but such responses are themselves constrained by the limited character of government. A nation’s military policy exists to protect its citizens’ rights; it is not a blank

²⁶ Actually, *Federalist* #31 goes much further than Starr indicates. In it, Hamilton asserts that questions about the scope of government are beyond the province of reason, a fact he inexplicably takes to imply that government has unlimited scope. Hamilton’s claims are profitably contrasted with Locke’s in his *Second Treatise*, ch. 9.

²⁷ For Madison’s views on property, see his 1792 essay, “Of Property,” available online.

check for foreign adventures, whether of the humanitarian-rescue or nation-building varieties (e.g., Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Darfur, etc.).

Though I found his discussion rather vague, I got the distinct sense that Starr would find the Objectivist position overly constraining (p. 217). On his view, the function of the state is as open-ended in foreign affairs as it is in domestic affairs. Ironically, though he castigates conservatives for their unilateralist hyperactivity, his brand of multilateralism is from this Objectivist perspective equally hyperactive (pp. 206-17). On the Objectivist view, there are definite limits to what the state can permissibly do in foreign affairs. Given this, we need an iron-clad guarantee that *our* Constitution (and our interpretation of it) are the last word when it comes to our blood, treasure, prestige, or carbon footprints—hence the attractions of unilateralism. By contrast, since Starr sees no need for strict limits on state power, he has little problem with the open-ended obligations foisted on us by multilateralism (p. 210). But it is hardly obvious that multilateralism so construed promotes freedom better than unilateralism.²⁸

I've been critical here of *FP*, but I should emphasize that my criticisms of the book do not contradict my praise for it. I've focused my criticisms on the basic premises of Starr's argument, but granting those premises, he has fashioned a powerful and important case for his brand of liberalism. I'm reminded of a claim of Ayn Rand's about the New Dealers that Starr celebrates in *FP*: "I disagreed with everything they said, but I would have fought to the death for the *method* by which they said it: for an *intellectual* approach to political problems."²⁹ Starr's book deserves the same compliment. Any intellectually robust movement needs a book like this, and offhand I can't think of a comparable book by a contemporary libertarian or Objectivist. Anyone wishing to write such a book would do well to study the virtues and flaws of *FP*, and put the former into practice.

4. Ekirch's *Decline of American Liberalism*

In the lecture of Ayn Rand's to which I just alluded, Rand drew her audience's attention to "a very interesting book" that she thought it would profit them to read: "With so illustrious a start," she asked, "how did the

²⁸ John Bolton's *Surrender Is Not an Option* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2008) provides a good rebuttal of Starr's claims for multilateralism. Unfortunately, though Bolton's book was reviewed in *The American Prospect*, the review there makes little effort to engage Bolton's arguments, substituting transparent fallacies for the attempt to do so (Mark Leon Goldberg, "The John Bolton Agenda," *The American Prospect* [November 8, 2007]).

²⁹ Rand, "The Intellectual Bankruptcy of the Age," in Rand, *The Voice of Reason*, p. 85.

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United States descend to its present level of intellectual bankruptcy?” Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr.’s *The Decline of American Liberalism*, she argued, “provides the material, the historical evidence, for the answer to that question.”³⁰

Ekirch’s *Decline* went through two editions, the first in 1955 and the second in 1967, before fading into the background of discourse on liberalism. (Doherty makes favorable reference to it, but Starr ignores it.) A new third edition of *Decline* has been re-issued by The Independent Institute in an attractive paperback edition with a Foreword by historian Robert Higgs. The front matter lists some twenty-three enthusiastic kudos for the book from prominent scholars, journalists, and journals, and Higgs offers a concise and admiring appreciation in his Foreword.

The book takes the form of an intellectual history of the United States in the grand old style of Merle Curti’s *The Growth of American Thought* (1943) and Louis Hartz’s *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955). The first six chapters begin by discussing the antecedents of American liberalism in “the European Experience,” working through the ideology of the American Revolutionists, moving to a discussion of the centralization of power under the Federalists, and ending with critical discussions of the “Jeffersonian Compromise” and Jacksonian Democracy. The next three chapters focus on slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. The remainder of the book offers an account of the rise of Progressivism, the Progressives’ support for and disillusionment by the First World War, a narrative and critique of the New Deal, and an attack on what Ekirch saw as the creeping militarism of American life in the twentieth century, stretching across both World Wars and into the Cold War. The then-nascent civil rights movement makes an appearance near the end.

True both to Rand’s description and the book’s own title, Ekirch’s story is one of moral and political retrogression. The ideal of liberalism for Ekirch appears to be a kind of romanticized Jeffersonianism—small-scale agrarianism combined with limited and decentralized government. Given this ideal, liberalism’s decline seems to have set in early with the consummation of the Revolution: “Somehow the dreams of an agrarian society seemed always to come into conflict with the realities of American economic development” (p. 39). Having defined liberalism as a mere “collection of ideas or principles which go to make up an attitude or ‘habit of mind’” (p. 3), and conceived its social expression in terms of an agrarian fantasy, it’s unsurprising that on Ekirch’s account, liberalism’s decline consists essentially in its successive confrontations with two centuries of hard reality.

Though Ekirch doesn’t put it this way, I think it’s clear that on the narrative he presents, liberalism declined because it lacked the clarity and rigor to offer solutions for the problems of its day. For all their good

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

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intentions, Ekirch's liberals do not seem to have grasped how to reconcile their agrarian conception of property with the requirements of industrial capitalism. Nor were they able to reconcile their commitment to constitutionalism with a strong federal government, or their commitment to civil liberties with the need for a strong military response to totalitarianism. Throughout Ekirch's account, then, we see liberals swinging from one side of a false dichotomy to the other—from agrarian quasi-anarchism to nationalist socialism, from abolitionism about slavery to abolitionism about Reconstruction, from imperialist militarism with Spain to quasi-pacifist appeasement of the Axis and the Soviet Union. The book might well have been subtitled "Episodes in the History of Muddled Thinking."

Unfortunately, Ekirch is himself a captive of many of the same confusions. He criticizes the illiberality of Reconstruction after the Civil War but says nothing about how, without a military occupation of the South by the Union, Southern blacks were to be protected against the lynchings and Jim Crow laws that he deplores a few pages later (pp. 141, 145). He complains that the Fourteenth Amendment's due process clause "vastly extended the domain of the Federal government," but doesn't consider the possibility that an extension of due process might have extended freedom as well (pp. 161-62). He regards the modern corporation as an agent of predation, but naively regards the antitrust laws as a legitimate method of domestication (pp. 197, 286). And his discussion of nineteenth-century property conflicts—railroads, homesteaders, Indians—is a confused muddle (pp. 90-94, 152-60). Were homesteaders' rights violated by the "disposal of public lands" to railroad companies or by the subsidies granted them? Was the Homestead Act of 1862 a granting of Lockean rights or a violation of them? What exactly happened when "the white man" exerted "pressure upon Indian lands"? Is "pressure" a form of market competition or is it a rights violation? In the absence of a conception of rights more precise than a mere "habit of mind," such confusions are inevitable.

Though useful for the glimpse they give into the workings of wartime discourse, Ekirch's discussions of the World Wars and Cold War are notably long on polemics but short on facts. It is, after all, unclear how we are to judge Woodrow Wilson's decision to enter World War I, as Ekirch does, while ignoring questions about the rights of neutral shipping (p. 201). It is likewise unclear that Nazi, Japanese, and Italian aggression were *merely* a reaction to the unfairness of the Treaty of Versailles (p. 288), that domestic fascism was a "more real threat" to the United States than the Axis (p. 295), that American domestic policy was the moral equivalent of Soviet domestic policy (pp. 320, 334), or that mid-century fears of Communist subversion in the U.S. can be dismissed as mere "hysteria" (p. 336). In this respect, Ekirch's rhetoric prefigures Rothbard's unattractive synthesis of Old Right dudgeon and New Left nihilism.

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This is not to say that *Decline* is without value. In some ways, Rand was right to say that the book shows how liberals “betrayed their own liberal ideals,”³¹ It shows, for one thing, that the seeds of liberal self-defeat began with confusions embedded in the Founders’ own ideology, and shows how these confusions ramified through history. The book also offers a usefully critical perspective on the Progressives, interestingly at variance with Starr’s, emphasizing the continuities between American Progressivism and European anti-liberalism, both fascist and socialist.³² And Ekirch’s discussion of the confusions of Progressive discourse on war and imperialism around the time of World War I is both valuable and topically relevant. There are probably dissertations waiting to be written on the parallels between the wartime discourse of the Progressives and that of our contemporary “liberal hawks”; chapter 12 of *Decline* might not be a bad place to begin research.

Having said all this, it is not clear that *Decline* has, on the whole, held up after fifty years, as Higgs claims in his Foreword (p. xix). Much of what is uncontroversial in Ekirch’s account is now common knowledge (e.g., the expropriation of Native Americans, the excesses of McCarthyism), and much of what is controversial has been better handled by subsequent scholarship (e.g., Reconstruction). Beyond that, too much is missing from Ekirch’s narrative, and the book’s ratio of claims to factual support is problematically high. If as Higgs claims, “no good substitute for *The Decline of American Liberalism* is available” (p. xix), perhaps one thing the book shows us is the real need for one, beginning where *Decline* leaves off, supplying what it leaves out, and correcting what it gets wrong.

5. Conclusion

What then *do* we learn about liberalism and liberty from the 1,400+ pages under review? Three interconnected lessons, I think.

A first lesson is that democratic liberals and libertarians/Objectivists have to stop talking past one another on economic matters. The issue that divides them is whether liberty and well-being are better promoted by a regime of capitalist self-ownership or by redistributive/regulatory interferences in capitalist markets. This is a complex and contentious dispute, but it cannot be discussed if each party to the debate ignores the normative claims of the other, as all three of our authors do. Doherty writes as though the meaning of “liberty” were self-evident. Starr writes as though Hobhouse were both the first and last word on the subject. And Ekirch writes less from a

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

³² Cf. *FP*, pp. 99-116. Ekirch’s discussion is usefully compared with Leonard Peikoff’s in his *The Ominous Parallels* (Briarcliff Manor, NY: Stein and Day, 1982), ch. 14.

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spirit of analysis than of nostalgia. Better analyses would have to take the relevant disagreements more seriously.

Having said that, I think Starr's book offers a good *general* model for how to discuss the issues. What we need are histories, like Starr's, that integrate historical narrative and social science, taking competing conceptions of liberalism as independent variables in normative-historical experiments, and values like liberty and well-being as dependent variables in the same experiments. In an account of this sort, the conception of liberalism shown to be *best* conducive to liberty and well-being wins the day.

But if liberalism is effectively to function as an independent variable in such an experiment, it needs to be defined with greater precision than Doherty, Starr, or Ekirch give it. We cannot, after all, learn very much from an experiment whose independent variable is left undefined (à la Doherty and Starr), or is defined (à la Ekirch) as a "mere collection" of disparate items. Relatedly, if liberty is effectively to function as a dependent variable in such an experiment, it needs to be defined as well; we cannot learn much from an experiment in which liberty figures as a dependent variable but means several incompatible things. If so, we need historical and social scientific work on liberalism that draws more explicitly on *philosophical* analyses of the nature of liberty than any of the works under review.³³

If there is a single overarching lesson here, perhaps it is this: even after 1,400+ pages of elaboration, liberalism remains an "unknown ideal," and much more work has to be done before we achieve knowledge about it.³⁴

³³ For a good philosophical starting point, see Gerald C. MacCallum, Jr., "Negative and Positive Freedom," *Philosophical Review* 76 (1967), pp. 312-34.

³⁴ Thanks to Carrie-Ann Biondi for helpful editorial feedback, and to Carrie-Ann Biondi, Jason Raibley, and Michael Young for helpful discussion.