

Palmer, Tom G., ed. *After the Welfare State*. Ottawa, IL: Jameson Books/Students for Liberty, 2012.

After the Welfare State (*ATWS*) is a collection of essays edited by Tom Palmer, and distributed by Students for Liberty (SFL) to its network members. The book is meant, in a small package of 136 pages, to present the classical liberal view of the welfare state in a comprehensive manner to educated individuals who are just getting into libertarianism. It is mostly an effective primer for further exploration into libertarian political philosophy, accessible to those not well-versed in the subject, but deep enough to sink one's teeth into.

SFL's strategy with *ATWS*, and with the rest of its publications, is to hand it out to any students who are sufficiently interested in liberty to stop at a table occupied by SFL advertisements and grab a free book. The vast majority of the students who get this book won't read it, but a free book is still free and worth picking up for that reason alone. The hope is that some percentage of the aggregate will crack the book open at some point and take a quick look inside at all of the crazy libertarian talk about corporate money and the elimination of the minimum wage. If they like what they read, the hope is that they will show up to a few on-campus libertarian club events, and maybe even join the ranks.

Given this strategy, *ATWS* is not designed like a traditional book or collection of essays. It has to walk a tightrope: on the one hand, it has to be intellectually deep enough work to intrigue politically interested college students into further exploration of the ideas; on the other hand, it has to be flashy enough to entice a student to sit down and read past the first paragraph. The result is a bit scattered and uneven, but still worth reading, and basically succeeds in walking the tightrope.

ATWS is broken up into four sections. The first is "Mutual Plunder and Unsustainable Promises," which leads off with an essay by Palmer on the current status of the welfare states in Europe and the U.S., and follows up with a pair of essays discussing the development of the welfare state in Italy and Greece. Next is "The History of the Welfare State and What It Displaced," consisting of an essay on the first welfare state in Germany and two essays on mutual-aid societies. The third section is "The Welfare State, the Financial Crisis, and the Debt Crisis," with an essay on the inherent financial insolvency of the welfare state, and an essay detailing an example of its bad effects during the 2000s' housing bubble. Finally, "Poverty, Morality, and Liberty" summarizes the classical liberal argument against the welfare state.

The first section is the most fun to read since it is full of flashy details and statistics that can be used against one's statist opponents in any

argument on government efficiency. Palmer and the other authors use mind-boggling figures to show just how absurdly bloated and mismanaged the modern welfare state is today, with the U.S. taxpayer on the hook for somewhere between \$60 and \$120 trillion in unfunded liabilities. The essays on Italy and Greece tell the stories that libertarians love to hear about the colossal destruction unleashed by state intervention there.

Palmer's essay on Bismarck's Germany in the second section continues the fun, and stands out as one of the best essays in the book. Here Palmer recounts the rarely told story of how Bismarck, the conservative master manipulator, introduced the welfare state in order to induce the German masses into conformity, cultivating their dependence on the state. Such an essay is sure to shock newcomers who may never previously have heard anything adverse about the welfare state or the intentions of its founders.

Unfortunately, the book really slows down for the next forty-five pages across two essays, both of them about pre-welfare-state, mutual-aid societies. Mutual-aid societies are an essentially unknown institution that existed in pre-welfare state societies, and which provided relief voluntarily through insurance agencies and cooperative organizations. Granting the general importance of the topic, I don't think that one-third of the book needed to be devoted to fleshing out the nitty-gritty details of how these organizations operated. I, for one, wasn't particularly interested in the minute inner workings of mutual-aid societies' election procedures or their organizational culture, whether from a historical standpoint or for polemical purposes. One short essay to give an overview on the subject would have sufficed; unfortunately, the two essays on mutual-aid societies slow the book's momentum for a third of its length.

The last two sections are much better. One stand-out is an essay by Johan Norberg on the utter rottenness of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, two government-sponsored institutions managed, financed, and endorsed solely by dishonest individuals who knew they were peddling snake oil for short-term gain at long-term expense. Palmer's final essay on the nature of poverty from a classical liberal perspective would be especially valuable for newcomers, but I think it should have been placed at the front of the book, to serve as a primer for the rest of the material. Admittedly, the statistics on the modern welfare state in Palmer's essay were an extremely useful hook, but a few highlights from that section could have been brought up in a short introduction.

As with SFL's mission statement, the book's authors adhere to a broad understanding of libertarianism and classical liberalism. There is no mention in the book of Austrian economics, anarchy, Objectivism, or any other sub-categories of libertarianism. This is good policy for a primer; there is no need to alienate newcomers by focusing excessively on in-fighting. To account for the diversity of libertarian opinions on the welfare state, Palmer does note that libertarians have marginally different fixes for the problems the

welfare state claims to solve, but ultimately, all classical liberals agree on the nature of the problem.

Experienced libertarians with a full understanding of the nature of the welfare state and its history probably won't get much from *ATWS*, except perhaps the usual aggravation which comes from hearing about the horrors of "Progressivism." Newcomers to the ideas will, however, profit from a book that is both a good read and likely to inspire a desire for further exploration of libertarian ideas.

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