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Book Review

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

Matt Zwolinski and John Tomasi
Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2023; 432 pp.

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A philosophically minded person interested in libertarian ideas was, until recently, deprived of a comprehensive monograph on the subject that was not written as a primer (Boaz 1997) and was not a work engaged in developing a particular stance within libertarianism (Rothbard 1973, 1982). Fortunately, this has started to change, which is probably also a sign of this paradigm's maturity. After all, it would not be an exaggeration to state that a conscious contemporary libertarian movement has existed just over fifty years.

Since 2012, Polish readers have been fortunate to have at their disposal the book *W poszukiwaniu podstaw libertarianizmu* (In search of the foundations of libertarianism), written by Dariusz Juruś

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(2012), a philosopher from the Jagiellonian University. The approach of Juruś was to select a proper representative, an Aristotelian πρoσ εν (*pros hen*, literally "in relation to one"; i.e., a focal meaning), of the libertarian stance in the narrow sense. The natural choice was none other than Murray Rothbard—deservedly called Mr. Libertarian—and, by doing so, Juruś centered the book on the idea that absolute property rights are supported by a triad of natural law ethics, Austrian economics, and anarchistic individualism. With this well-defined point of reference, it is possible to present a broader view of the whole plethora of libertarian and quasi-libertarian positions as well as dissect their affinities and differences in detail.

However, this is not the only useful way of approaching the range of libertarian positions. One can, for example, provide a (possibly provisional) definition and then apply it to delineate various stances inside and outside the libertarian movement. Alternatively, one can list a set of libertarian thinkers and then start to look for their common core ideas. All these methods can be fruitful in their own right, provided they are executed thoroughly and with caution.

Matt Zwolinski and John Tomasi, two well-known academics associated with the Bleeding Heart Libertarians platform, begin their intellectual history of libertarianism by establishing a set of common core ideas. In *The Individualists*, they single out six ideas that form a bundle of concepts encompassing libertarian positions: "property rights, negative liberty, individualism, free markets, a skepticism of authority, and a belief in the explanatory and normative significance of spontaneous order" (6). These ideas are elaborated in the first chapter (20–33). Chapter 2 gives a concise but quite thorough intellectual history of libertarianism. Subsequent chapters provide an extensive overview of virtually all the major topics discussed by libertarians: private property (chapter 3); the state and anarchism (chapter 4); free markets and big business (chapter 5); spontaneous orders and the question of poverty (chapter 6); and issues of race and war (chapters 7–8).

There is a lot to be learned from reading *The Individualists*, and the book is recommendable on several points. First, the authors' overall ability to synthesize information is impressive. Despite the relative nonmainstream status of libertarianism, there are still a lot of topics to cover, and it was certainly not an easy task to choose the

most relevant ones, overview them in a succinct way, and maintain a proper balance between them. In this sense, the book achieves its goal neatly, mainly thanks to the six main ideas it is built on.

Second, the footnotes and references are very comprehensive and could be useful points of departure for readers who want to explore particular issues on their own. The choice of sources and thinkers is quite representative, and one should especially welcome the fact that Murray Rothbard is by far the most-invoked thinker in the book, mentioned over two hundred times. For example, the book contains an explicit appreciation of Rothbard's synthesis of liberty-inspired free-market anarchism and the Locke-Mises tradition of classical liberalism as benchmarks of libertarianism (60–61), as well as an acknowledgment of Rothbard's role in inspiring Robert Nozick to hone his thoughts on libertarianism into *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (62).

Third, of the six topical chapters, the one on property is praiseworthy for its analytic acuteness, such as exhibited in the classification of the arguments for private property into historical, economic, and moral categories (80–87). The real highlight of chapter 3 is the discussion of the Lockean and Humean approaches to property and their ultimate convergence in many aspects despite their different philosophical presuppositions (90–108). Similarly, the historical chapter neatly distinguishes three particular eras of libertarian thought, underlines the different circumstances in which libertarianism developed in the Old and New Worlds in the nineteenth century, and acknowledges the divergent aims of the various coexisting libertarian movements—for example, the more conservative Liberty and Property Defence League versus the progressive Personal Rights Association (40–43).

In every chapter, one can find many important insights. There are reminders that big business was often not the most oppressed minority but an oppressor instead (167–72), and that it was not charity but mutual aid that provided bottom-up social welfare programs for the working classes (198–202). Another insight is that one should be wary of saying that liberties have eroded since the American Revolution—as Cato Institute's mission statement claimed for years—because this is simply false in the case of slaves and their free descendants (250). Indeed, the book is filled with

such small gems that can help libertarians straighten their thinking and further their discussions with nonlibertarians.

That said, one should not take the blurb advice of Tyler Cowen and treat the book as the definitive word on libertarianism up to the present day. Although the book is for the most part decently impartial, one can guess the sympathies of the authors from the fact that some sketchy and dismissive criticisms, especially of Rothbard, are included in the main text, instead of being relegated to the footnotes (for an example, see the comments on Rothbard's original argument for self-ownership in *For a New Liberty* on page 73). But in general, this is a very minor nuisance that only becomes overtly apparent in the last two chapters, when the authors delve into questions of race and immigration. One can only hope that other intellectual history books will handle these issues in a similar noninvasive manner.

A more important issue is that, for a European reader, the race question is discussed out of proportion compared to other possible topics that could fit the bill—for example, the status of various nonheterosexual orientations and other cultural norms prevalent in societies throughout history—but are maybe surrounded by less controversy in the current debate. Another issue given the fact that the book appeared in 2023 and was probably finished a little earlier, there are clear blind spots concerning libertarian discussions over mandatory vaccination policies, lockdowns, and foreign intervention.[1] The latter is somewhat touched upon in the last chapter, but unfortunately this chapter is not as developed as the earlier chapters, and it does not address fundamental questions such as the proper libertarian criteria for determining whether a war is just or for supporting war.[2] Instead, the authors rely mostly on a few quotes from major libertarian thinkers (282–87) regarding the Vietnam War and the State of Israel.

[1] Mandatory vaccination policies, of course, did not start with COVID-19. For example, see Durbach (2004).

[2] For example, it seems to be of utmost importance whether the current situation in Ukraine is assessed from the point of view of the Sumnerian "forgotten man" in Zaporizhzhia and the Donbas region or as a power struggle between the states of Ukraine (supported by various Western governments) and Russia. It should also be asked whether the 2014 Maidan Revolution was an outcome of a majority of Ukrainians' longing for a Western standard of living or purely a United States–financed coup without popular backing.

Two more major sins of commission and omission should be pointed out. Despite its very broad overview of libertarian positions, the book contains virtually no mention of Hans-Hermann Hoppe. Of course, it would not be at all surprising for bleeding heart libertarian–oriented authors to scrutinize Hoppe's views thoroughly and judge them as unlibertarian. Instead, the authors relegate Hoppe to just two mentions in the whole book: on his objection to free immigration, or rather how it "depart[s] from libertarians' traditional defense of immigration" (244), and on his links to Alt-Right activists such as Richard Spencer and Jared Taylor (290). This omission of Hoppe contrasts starkly with the treatments of Norbert Slenzok and Łukasz Dominiak, two scholars who find many valuable libertarian insights in Hoppe's work.

The omission of Hoppe is especially appalling since Zwolinski and Tomasi do not try to reconstruct the (possibly flawed) logic behind the support of both closed borders and an Alt-Right-friendly strategy from the libertarian standpoint as Hoppe understands it.[3] Moreover, a reader of chapter 3 would benefit from the knowledge that Hoppe explicitly acknowledges his approach to property rights as Humean. In Hoppe's view, property rights are not natural but serve as the proper means of solving all interpersonal conflicts in principle. Yet this is for him exactly the root of the absoluteness of property rights. Moreover, one could point out the novelty of argumentation ethics, which draws inspiration from Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas, philosophers seldom read by libertarians.[4]

Finally, there arises the question of whether the bundle approach that the authors assume does not blur the distinction between contemporary classical liberals and libertarians. At the outset, strict libertarianism is defined as "a radical political view which holds that individual liberty, understood as the absence of interference with a person's body and rightfully acquired property, is a moral

[3] In recent years, I have find myself more and more at odds with Hoppe and in line with the authors of *The Individualists* on open borders, political strategy, and geopolitics. Still, I believe that one has to carefully reconstruct, and not denigrate, positions that one does not agree with.

[4] However, it is true that these arguments did not catch the eyes of Anglophone philosophers. See, e.g., the debate between Hoppe and his libertarian critics in the November 1988 issue of *Liberty* (Friedman 1988; Jones 1988; Hoppe 1988; Machan 1988; Rasmussen 1988; Steele 1988; Waters 1988; Yeager 1988).

absolute and that the only governmental activities consistent with that liberty are (if any) those necessary to protect individuals from aggression by others" (17). However, this distinction effectively disappears afterward. This begs the question of where a bleeding heart libertarian falls on the spectrum of libertarianism. It is clear that if one subscribes to such a position, then he has already made serious antiproperty concessions, allowing for higher principles or for some pluralistic solution. However, if these considerations are set aside, it can be claimed that the distinctiveness (or, to follow the authors, the soul) of libertarianism lies precisely in the primacy of property rights[5]—and it is exactly this emphasis that makes libertarianism a coherent political philosophy. This distinction does not deny that, in today's practice, various libertarian groups may work hand in hand under some big tents. Nevertheless, there is some explanatory value in this distinction.

On the whole, despite its weaknesses, the book is an especially worthwhile read for libertarians well steeped in libertarianism in the tradition of Rothbard. For one, it provides a broader view of libertarianism than one can infer from reading books such as *The Ethics of Liberty*. Additionally, *The Individualists* poses a plethora of questions with which, readers, especially convinced Rothbardian readers, can refine certain arguments and particular positions in the best Millian fashion. Paradoxically, people more in line with left libertarianism or bleeding heart libertarianism will probably learn less, as they can skip over the more controversial points, honing biases against certain positions instead of tackling the reasoning behind them.

An intellectual history of libertarianism was badly needed and *The Individualists* fills the gap quite well. One can only hope that it will be followed by similar books that will approach the topic from a different angle or by using a different method.

[5] With "I want state as a territorial monopoly but with noncompulsory payments" (Ayn Rand), "I found a reason to justify the coercive-but-as-if-non-coercive payments to the state" (Robert Nozick), or even "I don't care about principles; I want less government and more freedom in my lifetime" (every second random Libertarian Party member) falling into a gray area, these should also be given the benefit of the doubt and counted as libertarian.

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