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Berard Reviews Friedrich von Hayek's "The Constitution of Liberty"

Peter Berard¹

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<p><u>The Constitution of Liberty</u> Friedrich von Hayek University of Chicago Press 2011 9780226315393</p>
<p>Rating: One Star</p>	

It's honestly getting to be like Charlie Brown and the football, me and these right-wing intellectuals. I mean it when I say I expect more from these people.

I didn't expect the world from Hayek. I know how much a "Nobel" in economics is worth. *The Road to Serfdom* might be the single most ludicrously inaccurate prediction of the future taken seriously by "serious" people in recorded history. But I at least expected something more than the sententious performance of intellect, slathered over a fundamental lack of insight or even curiosity, that I got in *The Constitution of Liberty*.

The list of terms in *The Constitution of Liberty* that either aren't defined or are defined in ways that beg further definition by anyone with a half-awake critical faculty encompass every important concept Hayek uses to make his argument, from "freedom" to "coercion" to, my favorite, "civilization." "Civilization" requires this, this, and that, mostly the unfettered right of people to dispose of their property, at least in the various ways that people near the "height of civilization" — as far as Hayek was concerned, basically, his boyhood in pre-WWI bourgeois Europe — were used to doing. A lot of syllogisms between underdefined concepts, like so many venture capital promises or poorly laid invasion plans.

I don't read these books because I think I'll like them (though I never foreclose the possibility in advance). I read them for various types of insight, both those into "the enemy" and those that are more broadly applicable. There wasn't a lot of the latter, here. I actually do think there's some merit — at least enough to consider, if not to adopt whole hog — to the notion that rational planning isn't an end-all-be-all and that

there needs to be room for experimentation in economic processes, and other processes as well . . . though it is worth noting the idea we simply can't process the information well or quickly enough has taken some knocks in the "Information Age." Maybe Hayek's work on economics would make the point with less baggage (though as a rational economic actor, I wouldn't bet on it).

I probably should not have made that "rational actor" crack, because the main thing of value to be taken from this book is that it is a mistake to associate libertarianism or "classical liberalism" with rationalism, in any sense of the word. Hayek neither believes people to be rational actors nor that rational economic behavior is necessary to an economic system and often eschews "rationalism" as the philosophy of top-down planners who think they can make everything anew. I had some inkling of this from reading scholars of the right like Corey Robin and Quinn Slobodian, but it is good to see it on the page. Among other things, this implies much more of an embrace of established rules and hierarchies than we often associate with "free-wheeling" libertarianism (and causes one to raise an eyebrow at how often, including in this book, Hayek averred he was no conservative).¹ Once you open that door — that what we've got from constitutions to borders to religious beliefs is likely a good inheritance for freedom unless it can be "proven false" (to whose satisfaction, exactly?) was imposed by "central planners" — the walkway to anarcho-capitalists waving the yellow and black to support ICE is clear. So, too, more seriously, is the neoliberal embrace of the state (and in some, but not all, cases the nation or even the empire), precisely to enforce the creation and nurturing of markets. States and markets aren't opposites, as a strain of libertarian thought contends — they necessitate and in some ways constitute each other.

All in all, this was worth reading to "catch the scent" of this particular ingredient in the stew of the modern right. Capitalist ideologues have been trying for a long time to find a figure isomorphic to Marx, but for their side. Sometimes they enlist Adam Smith, who died before Marx was born, has numerous negative things to say about capitalism and rich people, and whose most inspired reader probably was Karl Marx. Hayek is a close second in the sweepstakes as a potential capitalist system-builder (a fervent cult insists on Ayn Rand as the capitalist Marx but that's just stupid), but try as they might, you can't really map his powers, his influence, or even his meme-ability anywhere near that to the grumpy old Rhenish grouch. But they tried hard enough that aspects of Hayek's thought have permeated modern right-wing thinking, even if relatively few of his influencees can say exactly how, beyond mumbling something about price signals. That Hayek's main influence is actually non-rational, in contrast to how libertarians

like to posture, is ironic. That Hayek helped ensconce a shallow performance of intellectual virtuosity shellacked over a curious lack of real critical curiosity . . . well, that's hardly unique to the right. That's ubiquitous, alas.

Peter Berard, Ph.D., is San Antonio Review's *Book Review Editor*. He is an organizer, historian and writer living in Watertown, Mass.

Footnotes

1. Editor's note: Not conservative, but neoliberal. [↗](#)