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Colonial Americans Were Not Libertarians!

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...and other things I learned by going to the source

A couple weeks ago a Twitter discussion touched on a few matters I knew I could never do justice to in 140 characters. I had occasion to visit the "libertarian think tank" Cato Institute's site, not a place I go often, and once again I saw references to *Cato's Letters*. Not many Americans I've met have ever heard of these 144 essays, written from 1720-1723 by John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon ("T&G"), two radical Whigs who wrote about politics and society in the decades before the Revolutionary War. I encountered them very briefly in my studies at John Abbott College, Province of Quebec—the only U.S. History class I ever took that wasn't designed and taught by Americans using American textbooks. I'd been meaning to revisit them ever since the first time I read that Cato Institute took their name from these once famous writings. I had no intention of writing a lengthy essay, but when I quickly confirmed my long nagging suspicion of the complete and utter disconnect between Cato, the Institute, and my recollection of *Cato's*, the *Letters*, I kept reading, bookmarking, following bibliography links. Then I started writing, ...and then I just kept writing. If an academic-style paper complete with bibliography is your thing you can see it [here](#). I know it's not everyone's cup of tea, so I've tried to summarize what I learned in a few paragraphs below. All my sources are listed in the bibliography of the essay.

Cato's Institute's brand of "Libertarianism" was unheard of in T&G's era. The ideas were under the political umbrella of anarchism. The word itself was first used in 1789, two years after the Constitutional Convention of 1787, and it referred to something that looked much more like the *Libertarian Socialism* of Noam Chomsky.

The Kochs started Cato and sit on its board, and they recently tried a full takeover. The Institute sincerely believes itself to be independent from them and was determined to do everything it could to maintain that appearance, as they know association with the Kochs is toxic in many circles. They would be considered toxic in T&G's circles too... in *No. 35. Saturday, July 1, 1721. Of Publick Spirit* Gordon wrote: "**particular men may be too rich. ...It is one of the effects of arbitrary power, that the prince has too much, and the people too little; and such inequality may be the cause too of arbitrary power.**" And get this, David Koch, Mitt Romney and all you self-styled 'job-creators' : "**...sometimes even this gross wickedness is called publick spirit, because forsooth a few workmen and labourers are maintained out of the bread and the blood of half a million.**"

Americans have always hated *corruption in government* but early Americans never hated government!

Americans have always valued science! In *No. 67. Saturday, February 24, 1722. Arts and Sciences the Effects of Civil Liberty Only, and Ever Destroyed Or Oppressed By Tyranny* Gordon writes: "**Ignorance of arts and sciences, and of every thing that is good, together with poverty, misery, and desolation, are found for the most part all together, and are all certainly produced by tyranny.**" The Cato Institute apparently has a vested interest in denying climate science, demonstrated by the literature for sale on its web site.

The United States of America owes its very existence to 18th century France, the French Enlightenment, the Republic of Letters, and the liberal education so many movers and shakers of the period acquired at the College of New Jersey in Princeton. Nine Princeton alumni were delegates at the Constitutional Convention. Woodrow Wilson [said](#) in 1896, "What takes our admiration and engages our fancy in looking back to that time is the generous union then established in the college between the life of philosophy and the life of the State."

The Cato Institute employs talking points and some very basic techniques of rhetoric to "[work] upon the prejudices of the People, until the wealth is aggregated in a few hands" (as Abraham Lincoln once put it in a letter to Col. William F. Elkins, Nov. 21, 1864).

21st century neo-Libertarians ignore 40 years of discourse in American history that deemphasizes the importance of Locke to early colonial thinkers, and re-frames Jefferson's views of Federalism. Everything Cato tells you about Founders and colonial Americans should be suspect. See Robert Shalhope (1972) and/or Daniel T. Rodgers (1992).

I had very little time to finish the essay because I wanted to post it on the 4th of July. It's basically done but I'm still editing and re-organizing for clarity, and

proofreading for typos (I wrote it entirely on line, mostly on a laptop, and I'm still finding many). I hope it inspires people of all political backgrounds to... well, just to look things up for yourselves! **Individual liberty, public institutions and social justice are not mutually exclusive**, and it's distinctly un-American to say otherwise. **"Where-ever publick spirit is found dangerous, she will soon be seen dead."** — Thomas Gordon, Cato's Letter #35, 1721.