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## Libertarian Book Clubs Foster Lasting Change

Posted by [Eric D. Dixon](#) on Monday, September 3, 2012 · [Leave a Comment](#)

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Although I've attended Mark Skousen's annual [FreedomFest](#) convention in Las Vegas several times as a participant, in summer 2011 I had the honor of presenting a session for the first time, alongside a roster of notable libertarian names — a great many of which I've admired and, in some cases, known for years. Titled "Libertarian Book Clubs: How To Promote The Literature of Liberty," my 40 minutes or so of remarks and Q&A no longer appear to be available for purchase online, so [I've uploaded the audio of my presentation](#). I've also included at the bottom of this post the text that I prepared to form the basis of the first several minutes of my presentation, although it likely differs in detail from what I actually said.

This is a topic that's particularly close to my heart. During the four years I spent as editor for the [Show-Me Institute](#) in Missouri, I ran a free-market book club primarily targeted toward college-age youth in the St. Louis area. Although attendance had its highs and lows over the years, at its heights I believe it was easily the institute's single best program.

I've tried to help spread the concept, through conversations, [interviews](#), and [an article in SPN News](#) — but, as far as I know, similar clubs haven't taken off elsewhere. That's a shame, because if we want to spread the ideas of liberty in a way that brings lasting political and cultural change, it's important to get as many people as possible to grapple with those ideas in all their richness and complexity.

Before getting to my prepared FreedomFest remarks below, here's the blurb that I wrote to preface the book club's web page:

The Show-Me Institute sponsors a biweekly book club primarily directed to Saint Louis–area college students (and college-age non-students) who are interested in exploring a broad spectrum of the ideas of liberty. The institute and its scholars do not necessarily agree with or advocate the ideas contained in the books selected for use in the club; rather, the institute hopes to encourage critical analysis, debate, and discussion of a wide range of thought about freedom and free-market economic perspectives.

And here's the full list of books that we covered, most of which were deleted from the Show-Me Institute website during the months after I left. Everything from early 2006 up through the Leon Kass book in 2007 was chosen by the Show-Me Institute's first editor,

[Timothy Lee](#), and everything from the Johan Norberg book in 2007 through the James Tooley book in 2011 was selected by me.

**2006:**

- John Stuart Mill, [On Liberty](#)
- Milton Friedman, [Capitalism and Freedom](#)
- David Friedman, [Law's Order: What Economics Has to Do With Law and Why It Matters](#)
- P.J. O'Rourke, [Parliament of Whores: A Lone Humorist Attempts to Explain the Entire U.S. Government](#)
- Jane Jacobs, [The Death and Life of Great American Cities](#)
- Hernando de Soto, [The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else](#)
- Frederic Bastiat, [That Which Is Seen and That Which Is Not Seen: The Unintended Consequences of Government Spending](#)
- F.A. Hayek, [The Constitution of Liberty](#)
- David Schoenbrod, [Saving Our Environment From Washington: How Congress Grabs Power, Shirks Responsibility, and Shortchanges the People](#)
- Robert Nozick, [Anarchy, State, and Utopia](#)

**2007:**

- Ayn Rand, [The Virtue of Selfishness](#)
- Larry Lessig, [Free Culture: The Nature and Future of Creativity](#)
- Richard Epstein, [How Progressives Rewrote the Constitution](#)
- W. Michael Cox and Richard Alm, [Myths of Rich and Poor: Why We're Better Off Than We Think](#)
- Virginia Postrel, [The Future and Its Enemies: The Growing Conflict Over Creativity, Enterprise, and Progress](#)
- David Boaz, [Libertarianism: A Primer](#)
- Ronald Bailey, [Liberation Biology: The Scientific and Moral Case for the Biotech Revolution](#)
- Leon Kass, [Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics](#)
- Johan Norberg, [In Defense of Global Capitalism](#)
- F.A. Hayek, [The Road to Serfdom](#)

**2008:**

- Isabel Paterson, [The God of the Machine](#)
- Ludwig von Mises, [Bureaucracy](#)
- Bertrand de Jouvenel, [The Ethics of Redistribution](#)
- Randy Barnett, [Restoring the Lost Constitution: The Presumption of Liberty](#)
- Barry Goldwater, [The Conscience of a Conservative](#)

- James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, [The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy](#)
- Carl Watner, ed., [I Must Speak Out: The Best of The Voluntaryist, 1982–1999](#)
- Robert Higgs, [Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government](#)
- Tibor R. Machan, ed., [Individual Rights Reconsidered: Are the Truths of the U.S. Declaration of Independence Lasting?](#)
- Albert Jay Nock, [Our Enemy, The State: A Study of Social Power vs. State Power and of The State in Colonial America](#)
- Thomas Sowell, [Economic Facts and Fallacies](#)
- Rose Wilder Lane, [The Discovery of Freedom: Man's Struggle Against Authority](#)
- David Friedman, [The Machinery of Freedom: Guide to a Radical Capitalism](#)
- Leonard E. Read, [Anything That's Peaceful](#)
- Lysander Spooner, [The Lysander Spooner Reader](#)

## 2009:

- Milton Friedman, [Money Mischief: Episodes in Monetary History](#)
- Ludwig von Mises, [Liberalism: The Classical Tradition](#)
- Mark Skousen, [Vienna & Chicago, Friends or Foes? A Tale of Two Schools of Free-Market Economics](#)
- David T. Beito, [From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State: Fraternal Societies and Social Services, 1890–1967](#)
- Frederic Bastiat, [Selected Essays on Political Economy](#)
- Thomas J. DiLorenzo, [How Capitalism Saved America: The Untold History of Our Country, From the Pilgrims to the Present](#)
- Burton W. Folsom, [The Myth of the Robber Barons: A New Look at the Rise of Big Business in America](#)
- Jerome Tuccille, [It Usually Begins With Ayn Rand](#)
- Brian Doherty, [Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement](#)
- Tom G. Palmer, [Realizing Freedom: Libertarian Theory, History, and Practice](#)
- Auberon Herbert, [The Right and Wrong of Compulsion by the State, and Other Essays](#)
- Robert A. Levy and William Mellor, [The Dirty Dozen: How Twelve Supreme Court Cases Radically Expanded Government and Eroded Freedom](#)
- Jeff Benedict, [Little Pink House: A True Story of Defiance and Courage](#)
- Henry Hazlitt, [Economics in One Lesson](#)
- Roy A. Childs, Jr., [Liberty Against Power](#)

## 2010:

- Milton Friedman and Rose Friedman, [Free to Choose: A Personal Statement](#)
- Ludwig von Mises, [Human Action: A Treatise on Economics](#)
- Peter McWilliams, [Ain't Nobody's Business if You Do: The Absurdity of Consensual Crimes in Our Free Society](#)

- Randal O'Toole, [The Best-Laid Plans: How Government Planning Harms Your Quality of Life, Your Pocketbook, and Your Future](#)
- Robert Nisbet, [Twilight of Authority](#)
- Julian Simon, [The Ultimate Resource 2](#)
- David Friedman, [Hidden Order: The Economics of Everyday Life](#)
- Gordon Tullock, Arthur Seldon, and Gordon L. Brady, [Government Failure: A Primer in Public Choice](#)
- Bryan Caplan, [The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies](#)
- Thomas E. Woods Jr., [Meltdown: A Free-Market Look at Why the Stock Market Collapsed, the Economy Tanked, and Government Bailouts Will Make Things Worse](#)
- Arnold Kling, [Unchecked and Unbalanced: How the Discrepancy Between Knowledge and Power Caused the Financial Crisis and Threatens Democracy](#)
- Johan Norberg, [Financial Fiasco: How America's Infatuation with Home Ownership and Easy Money Created the Economic Crisis](#)
- F.A. Hayek, [The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism](#)

## 2011:

- Marc Guttman, ed., [Why Liberty: Personal Journeys Toward Peace and Freedom](#)
- Ludwig von Mises, [The Anti-Capitalistic Mentality](#)
- Jim Peron, ed., [The Liberal Tide: From Tyranny to Liberty](#)
- Timothy Sandefur, [The Right to Earn a Living: Economic Freedom and the Law](#)
- Mark Skousen, [The Making of Modern Economics: The Lives and Ideas of the Great Thinkers](#)
- James Tooley, [The Beautiful Tree: A Personal Journey Into How the World's Poorest People Are Educating Themselves](#)

With no further ado, here are my prepared remarks for the 2011 FreedomFest — and [here, again, is the audio](#), if you care to follow along:

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### **Libertarian Book Clubs Foster Lasting Change** **By Eric D. Dixon**

The free-market movement is filled today with organizations analyzing public policy and developing prescriptions for positive change. This is an important job. Public choice theory convincingly shows that politicians face a strong set of perverse incentives that will lead them to spend more, tax more, cater to special interests, and shore up their own power base, all to the detriment of private citizens, civil society, and the rule of law. Somebody has to keep an eye on these guys, so it's important to apply the principles of freedom and sound economics to the public policy sphere. Political power is always in flux, however, and today's policy success can be easily rescinded or undermined tomorrow. One of the ways to foster lasting change is to spread knowledge about the

fundamental arguments for freedom — complex ideas that aren't easily captured in op-eds or studies.

### **Other Groups**

I should point out that some national groups already make the literature of liberty at least one of their focuses. For instance, the Foundation for Economic Education and the Institute for Humane Studies hold summer seminars, and the Cato Institute sponsors Cato University every year — formerly multiple times per year — all including substantial reading lists of libertarian philosophy, history, and free-market economics. Students for Liberty, the Mises Institute, and Liberty Fund sponsor similar seminars. I certainly encourage people to participate in such programs when you can. But there's no reason we can't take this model to local communities on a widespread basis.

### **St. Louis**

In 2007, I started leading a free-market book club in the St. Louis area, which turned out to be one of the most fulfilling experiences of my career to date. The club had been started the previous year by my predecessor Timothy Lee, who had worked at the Cato Institute as staff writer, and has since returned to work with them as an adjunct scholar. He once shared with me his motivation for starting the club, saying: “State-based think tanks spend the bulk of their time talking about the nuts and bolts of public policy as it relates to current legislative debates. That's important, but I also saw a need for a program that would help young people understand the ideas of liberty from a more philosophical perspective.”

### **Authors**

He was right. There's a vast, rich library of freedom-oriented works that most people don't even begin to experience: from Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises to Milton and David Friedman; from modern experts like Robert Higgs and Thomas Sowell to classic intellectuals like John Stuart Mill and Frédéric Bastiat; from groundbreaking theory by James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock to practical history by David Beito and Jane Jacobs; from careful contemporary analysis and essays by David Boaz and Tom Palmer to books that helped launch a movement by Isabel Paterson and Rose Wilder Lane. During its five years of existence, the club I led in St. Louis covered 69 different books, and the list of books I wanted to cover in the future only grew over time. Such clubs could include a dozen different books every year for decades without running out of worthy material.

### **Origin**

Tim Lee modeled our particular club on the seminars he was familiar during his time at the Cato Institute, and I continued to use my own experience as a Cato intern as an inspiration for the type of material we covered and for how I led our biweekly discussions. Getting a club like this off the ground can be slow going. Tim spoke to a few St. Louis-area campus groups in 2006 to attract the initial group of students that participated, and for the first couple of years, we were lucky to get five or six participants at each meeting. Although it started out small, it began to snowball as through our biggest source of growth — an open-invitation policy. The book club tended to grow as a social

network, as I encouraged existing members bring their friends to join in the engaging conversation. Before long I was regularly hosting groups of 12 or 13. By mid-2010, the groups usually numbered in the 20s with a record attendance of 28 at a single meeting. Attendees often find themselves caught up in issues that they have previously never considered, or reading books about topics that they have never before found interesting or relevant. In this way, the book club provides a place for active, ongoing inquiry and discussion, targeting an age group that's hungry for new ideas. Participants ultimately not only absorb the ideas of freedom, they also pass them on to friends who aren't club members — and these young activists will likely retain a lifelong passion for liberty.

### **Institutional Sponsorship**

One primary reason for our club's success has been its institutional sponsorship. Working for a state-based think tank that was willing to provide free books and food for participants allowed the club to attract students who may, on balance, have otherwise decided not to come. These costs were relatively easy to manage at first, when only five or six people attended. But after a couple of years, I found we were spending hundreds of dollars each month on books and food. There are ways to mitigate such expenses. Although I used to order custom Chipotle burritos for each participant, I eventually moved toward much less expensive pizza, which turned out to be just as crowd-pleasing.

### **Getting Books**

I also found ways to economize when obtaining books. I've had great success getting good deals when ordering a couple of dozen books at a time, working with Bob Garber at the Cato Institute, Willard Sitz at the Mises Institute, and Jim Peron, formerly of Laissez Faire Books and now with Fr33Minds, a new libertarian bookseller. The Foundation for Economic Education has excellent deals on many of its books, like Bastiat's *Selected Essays on Political Economy*, and sometimes Amazon turns out to be least expensive source. We've cobbled together supplies of out-of-print books like *The Lysander Spooner Reader* and the Roy Childs collection *Liberty Against Power* through Amazon's used bookseller network. We've occasionally arranged to purchase books directly from authors. The organizer of FreedomFest, Mark Skousen, was kind enough to provide inexpensive copies of two of his books, *The Making of Modern Economics* and *Vienna & Chicago, Friends or Foes? A Tale of Two Schools of Free-Market Economics*. Brian Doherty arranged to have Reason send us a box full of copies of his fantastic history of modern libertarianism, *Radicals for Capitalism*. Students for Liberty has been doing fantastic work in making free copies of libertarian books available to student groups. SFL provided us with 20 copies of Henry Hazlitt's *Economics in One Lesson*, and they're getting ready to distribute thousands of free copies this fall of a new essay collection titled *The Morality of Capitalism* — which features essays by many leading libertarian scholars and economists, including four participants in this year's FreedomFest conference: Tom Palmer, David Boaz, John Mackey, and David Kelley.

### **Difficulty Level**

Getting a group of people to read and discuss entire books can be a balancing act. Sometimes people don't do all of the reading — or any of it. I tried to include both basic primers of free-market thought and more advanced treatises, and each category can

alienate some participants. Students who have been in the movement for a few years may be disinclined to revisit basic works, and newcomers can find more thorough scholarly texts to be intimidating. For this reason, although I consistently encouraged everybody to do the reading, I didn't bar anybody from participating in the conversation. Old hands at libertarian thought will usually have interesting insights to share whether or not they've done the current reading, and even newcomers can grasp advanced ideas if they have access to people who are willing to explain and discuss them patiently. Our discussions have tended to be wide-ranging sometimes straying into lines of conversation that are only tangentially related to the reading, but thereby harnessing the natural curiosity of participants — and always with a focus on the importance of freedom.

### **Visioncon**

Although the book club was developed as a way of reaching out into the community, the club's members came up with the idea of doing outreach of their own. We were fortunate to attract a wide range of bright, energetic young students who helped demonstrate one of the advantages of youth: the ability to think of innovative new ways to spread the ideas of liberty. In early 2010 and again early this year, a dozen or so members of the book club sponsored and manned a table at Visioncon, a science fiction and fantasy convention in southern Missouri. Several club members, being fans of science fiction and other related genres, hit upon the idea of having the book club sponsor a table at Visioncon, an annual convention held in Springfield. Club participants organized the logistics and paid for the table fee themselves. They also asked for donations of books about liberty that book club members and others were no longer likely to use, and ended up with a large selection. They wanted to share the ideas these books contain, so that instead of simply taking up space on somebody's shelf, they would now have the chance to enlighten somebody else.

From Tom Palmer's *Realizing Freedom* and Randy Barnett's *Restoring the Lost Constitution* to Rose Wilder Lane's *The Discovery of Freedom* and Robert Levy's *The Dirty Dozen*, the table was stacked with books we'd previously read. Book club members took turns manning the table for the convention's duration, engaging curious attendees in many conversations about the principles of freedom. About 90 percent of the books found new homes that weekend, spreading the ideas of liberty to people who might not have encountered them otherwise.

### **Replication**

So, if I've persuaded you that book clubs are a valuable method for spreading the ideas of liberty, how can you get started in your home town? Students for Liberty and Young Americans for Liberty are doing fantastic work in starting up campus groups, but each group is different, and reaching out to a local chapter may help them try a method for spreading liberty that they hadn't previously considered — particularly if you're able to provide them with a modicum of financial or logistical support.

### **SPN**

There's another route that's worth trying. The State Policy Network is an organization devoted to fostering state-based free-market think tanks, helping them share policy ideas and best practices. Being employed as the editor for an SPN member organization for the

past four years is what allowed me to work within a sponsored setting, appealing to both the brains and the stomachs of intellectually curious youth without having to worry about the costs myself. SPN currently has 58 member think tanks, at least one in every state. Visit [spn.org](http://spn.org) to find out whether you live near one of them, and if you do, get to know them. Become a donor. Attend their events. If they see that you take their work seriously, they may be receptive to your suggestion of spreading the ideas of freedom by sponsoring a book club. Whether they are able to front all the logistical costs or subsidize them only partially, I think most free-market think tanks would be anxious to try this method of reaching out to the youth in their community if only presented with a blueprint for how to make it work. It may be worth mentioning that this is also a great way for state-based think tanks to find promising young talent. During the past four years, we hired four people as research assistants from out of the ranks of our book club, based on my recommendation.

### **Conclusion**

Libertarian book clubs are a good way to spread great ideas that aren't explicitly tied to any particular ongoing policy debate, but that help shape people's fundamental notions about whether and why freedom is valuable in the first place. Ultimately, those cultural assumptions determine whether practical policy success will last over time. Spreading the ideas of liberty in a thorough way is a crucial step in promoting a free society.