



Free to Be...

Or, how to make a contemporary case for libertarianism

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Any book about libertarianism is bound to be a book about the United States. The American-born David Boaz admits that his origins will confine *The Libertarian Mind*, an updated version of his 1997 primer on the philosophy of individual freedom, to this country's political system. But even if Boaz were, say, a Swede, he'd be forced to talk quite a bit about the United States if he wanted to promote libertarian ideas. In most European countries, what passes for a free market political party is a socialist party with a crucifix attached to it. It is beautifully ironic that libertarianism, so profoundly influenced by European thought, found its most potent expression outside the continent—in a country that European intellectuals tend to deride as embarrassing and immoral.

“You learn the essence of libertarianism in kindergarten,” Boaz writes. “Don't hit other people, don't take their stuff, and keep your promises.” Elsewhere, he gives this definition: “Libertarianism is the view that each person has the right to live his life any way he chooses so long as he respects the equal rights of others.”

I don't know of any group that wouldn't describe its political views in this way. I also don't know of any that truly mean it besides the libertarians. The philosophy, so its proponents claim, is neither left nor right; it is, one might say, on the Z-axis of politics. To the libertarian, capitalism is not an economic system; it is a model for all human interaction. Government's only role is to act as the custodian of what Isaiah Berlin called negative liberty: freedom from coercion and external force. Government is the protector, not the granter, of this liberty.