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The Encyclopedia of Libertarianism

by [Martin Morse Wooster](#) • July/August 2009 • Vol. 59/Issue 6

Arr!

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There have been all sorts of books about libertarianism, from introductory treatises to memoirs and biographies of important figures in the field to histories such as Brian Doherty's significant *Radicals for Capitalism*. But until now there has been no encyclopedia of libertarianism, no one-volume reference work that college students or intellectually adventurous adults could use as a handy guide to libertarian ideas and personalities. The Cato Institute's *Encyclopedia of Libertarianism* fills that gap. It's a significant book that ought to be acquired by anyone with a serious commitment to fair and open debate.

Ronald Hamowy, a professor emeritus at the University of Alberta, has assembled articles from 163 scholars, ranging from New York Times economics columnist Tyler Cowen to decentralist historian Bill Kauffman. The contributors also include one Nobel Laureate, Chapman University economist Vernon L. Smith, as well as some uncredentialed freelancers.

The encyclopedia has several quirks. There are no entries for libertarian thinkers younger than Charles Murray, who was born in 1943. Anyone interested in learning about libertarian scholars who are now in their 40s and 50s will have to look elsewhere.

Nor are there any entries on libertarian institutions. The older libertarian organizations are covered by biographical entries on their founders.

Entries are divided into three classes: short biographies of important libertarian figures, longer entries on public-policy topics such as eminent domain, globalization, and health care, and still-longer entries on ideas, including four on economics (Austrian, Chicago, experimental, and Keynesian), two on liberalism (classical and German), and two on individualism (methodological and political/ethical).

The authors of these idea-based entries are generally fair, but also occasionally make claims unsupported by evidence. It is not true, as Jackson Kuhl argues, that "Hoover and the Republicans sealed their doom" in 1932 by supporting Prohibition; as historian Michael Lerner has shown, Prohibition was a minor rather than a major cause of Herbert Hoover's defeat, and Franklin Roosevelt's opposition to Prohibition was equivocal. Nor is it true, as Wesleyan University scholar Richard Adelstein contends in his entry on the early twentieth-century Progressive movement, that "for many, progressivism also entailed a commitment to racial purity"; the leading thinkers among the Progressives—Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann, and Walter Weyl—were generally free of racial prejudice. Adelstein's case would have been stronger if he had tied the Progressives to eugenics rather than to racism.

It should be noted that some of the authors of these idea-based entries add fresh libertarian insights to familiar topics. For example, in the entry on the New Deal, Wake Forest scholar Robert Whaples notes that the New Dealers used government spending for political ends, giving more money to swing states than to yellow-dog Democrat ones thought unlikely to vote for Republicans. Nevada, whose three

electoral votes were in play at the time, got six times as much welfare spending per capita as more solidly Democratic North Carolina. While New Deal spending did go first to the hardest-hit areas, Whaples writes, "Spending for political advantage in upcoming elections was a significant factor" in determining where Franklin Roosevelt doled out his welfare spending.

Two essays in the encyclopedia are especially important. The General Introduction, by Stephen Davies of Britain's Manchester Metropolitan University, eloquently distills several thousand years of libertarian history into 12 densely written pages. Anyone interested in the history of liberty will learn something from Davies's masterly writing. (For example, did you know that the first Europeans to call themselves "liberals" were Spaniards trying to recover from Napoleon's tyranny? Or that Lord Byron, in 1815, co-edited the freedom-oriented journal *The Liberal*?)

Also important is the essay on the "War on Terror" by Ohio State political scientist John Mueller. Mueller persuasively shows that the Bush administration policy of spending unlimited funds to protect every conceivable target from every conceivable threat flunks any reasonable cost-benefit test. He notes that the Pentagon, for example, is in the process of moving many of its employees to remote locations—without any consideration about how this dispersion will clog the roads or how our national security will be improved by forcing Defense Department employees and contractors to massively increase their fossil-fuel consumption.

The Encyclopedia of Libertarianism is an important reference book that shows the depth, range, and lasting significance of libertarian ideas.

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