

TOTAL FREEDOM FREEDOM

TOWARD A DIALECTICAL LIBERTARIANISM

CHRIS MATTHEW SCIABARRA



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TOWARD A DIALECTICAL LIBERTARIANISM

CHRIS MATTHEW SCIABARRA

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*To Bro, Wan, Bitty, Matt, and Goose—
for all your love and support*

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Introduction

Euphemisms are inoffensive terms that one may substitute for those that might be considered distasteful.¹ The word is derived from the Greek *euphēmos*, of good sound or omen.

The main title of this book, *Total Freedom*, may be of good sound to some ears, since it is partially an exercise in euphemism, but it actually signifies a movement “toward a dialectical libertarianism,” that is, a movement toward a dialectical approach to libertarian social theory.² I am fully aware that both “dialectics” and “libertarianism” have negative connotations within certain usually opposed intellectual circles. Nevertheless, this book seeks to reclaim radical social theorizing in the name of liberty. It stresses the necessity of context, the “totality” of systemic and dynamic connections among social problems (hence, “total”) that beckon toward fundamentally libertarian solutions (hence, “freedom”). In this unity, we might give new meaning to the credo of Marxist social theorist Roy Bhaskar (1993, 385) that “dialectic . . . is the pulse of freedom.”

Admittedly, there have been many books about dialectics and many books

1. That euphemisms are used for deceptive purposes is certainly true. See Hinckley 1997. On the relationship of euphemisms and “anti-concepts,” see Sciabarra 1995a, 316–19.

2. Libertarianism is a contemporary manifestation of classical liberalism. I do not use the word “liberalism” in this context, because American audiences might confuse it with twentieth-century welfare-state ideology. Still, libertarianism and classical liberalism are united by their commitment to individual rights, the rule of law, civil liberties, free markets, free trade, and antimilitarism. Some contemporary libertarians, such as Murray Rothbard, whose work I examine comprehensively in Part Two of this book, introduce a single complicating factor into this equation: anarchism. But Rothbard’s dedication to the rule of law—achieved through “competitive” defense and judicial agencies—qualifies him, in my view, as a successor to the broadly defined liberal tradition.

about libertarianism. But there has never been a book that had the intellectual audacity to put these two together. This unity provokes three essential questions: Why dialectics? Why libertarianism? Why dialectical libertarianism? As a brief reply, and as a preface to what follows in these pages, let me say the following:

Dialectics—because it is the art of context-keeping, the only methodological orientation that compels scholars toward a comprehensive grasp of the many factors at work in a given context. In my use of this word, I am reminded of Ayn Rand’s comments in her introduction to *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964, vii): “The title of this book may evoke the kind of question that I hear once in a while: ‘Why do you use the word ‘selfishness’ to denote virtuous qualities of character, when that word antagonizes so many people to whom it does not mean the things you mean?’ To those who ask it, my answer is: ‘For the reason that makes you afraid of it.’” By the conclusion of this book, I hope to have dispelled all fears with regard to the use of “dialectics,” for it has a rich, if misunderstood, history.

Libertarianism—because it deserves to be taken seriously as a legitimate radical political ideology, especially in light of Communism’s collapse and the end of the Cold War. After an age characterized by efforts to achieve a total eradication of freedom under statist regimes, it is time to consider a form of radicalism that aspires to go in the opposite direction.³

Dialectical libertarianism—because, in this integration, dialectics is rescued from those who view it as a totalitarian tool, just as libertarianism is rescued from those who view it as an extension of their fragmented, atomized view of reality. In this integration, dialectics is connected inextricably to the notion of freedom, and libertarianism is connected inextricably to the notion of totality. In this integration, freedom and totality mutually imply one another, for just as it is impossible to defend freedom successfully when severed from its broader requisite conditions, so too is it impossible to defend totality successfully when conjoined to illusory notions of finality and completeness, which spell the end of free inquiry.

Paradoxically, then, this vision for “total freedom” is critical of the “totalizing” utopian trends in intellectual history and modern politics that have their barbaric political analogue in twentieth-century totalitarianism. But a dialectical approach is just as opposed to the abstract notion of “total freedom” advocated by libertarians who have isolated their ideal from the context upon which it depends. Ultimately, this book challenges thinkers of all

3. On this last point, I am indebted to Don Lavoie.

stripes—anarchists, statists, and “minarchists” (that is, advocates of limited government), left, right, and center—to embrace the promise of a dialectical libertarianism.

It is true that this conjunction might be dismissed by some critics as an oxymoron. Indeed, like Georg Lukács before him, Andrew Collier (1994) suggests that there is an identity, a “homology,” between “transformational,” or dialectical, models and socialist politics, and a corresponding “homology” between Newtonian atomism and libertarian politics (201–2).⁴ Collier recognizes that, like the Left, “certain sections of the political right, sometimes called the ‘libertarian right,’ . . . claim to be working for human emancipation.” However, for Collier, libertarians are too dependent on an atomistic theory of human nature and social structure, which reduces existence to a dualistic choice between “voluntary or compelled relations” (201). He provokes libertarians to “an alternative defence,” but proclaims that “it is difficult to imagine what such a defence might be” (202).

This book can be considered a self-contained response to that fundamental challenge, even though it concludes a trilogy of works that began with *Marx, Hayek, and Utopia* and *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical*. Through a rereading of intellectual history, the trilogy aims to articulate the intimate relationship between dialectics and the defense of liberty. By examining each tradition and the interconnections between them, it is possible to strengthen both. It is my conviction that libertarians can provide—and have provided—far more “dialectical” models of social life than have previously been recognized, and that a productive future for both dialectical method and libertarian social theory is contained in this coupling.

My first two books were designed to introduce the reader to the dialectical sensibilities in the works of two major twentieth-century libertarian theorists: the Nobel Prize-winning free-market thinker F.A. Hayek and the philosopher Ayn Rand. Along the way, these works raised important questions about the nature of—and distinctions between—utopianism and radicalism.⁵

4. Collier (1994, 201) actually describes this as an identity between “realism”—a reference to Roy Bhaskar’s “critical realism”—and socialism. In this context, “critical realism” is simply the “dialectical” alternative to libertarian “atomism.” On the relationship between “dialectics” and “Marxism,” see Lukács [1919] 1971, 1–2.

5. The dialogue generated by these works has also helped me to frame the current study. For example, in their reviews of my earlier works, Hunt (1996), Gordon (1997a), Matz (1997), and Machan (1998b) all posed questions that could only be answered in the context of a subsequent volume. The first four chapters of *Total Freedom* attempt to clarify the very issues raised by Matz (1997, 358): “Part of the problem here is that [Sciabarra] does not articulate a plausible alternative, either historical or contemporary, to the dialectical approach. This would clarify what is really

Marx, Hayek, and Utopia introduced the trilogy through a comparative study of the works of Karl Marx and F.A. Hayek, two theorists often situated in binary opposition to one another. Hayek's thought exhibits a dialectical mode of inquiry, or what I have often called a dialectical "methodological orientation" or "research orientation," which guides his project toward the recognition of context in any understanding of the social totality and its constituted relations.⁶ Hayekian dialectics is a bulwark against intellectual and political hubris because it stresses that our studies of—and actions within—a social whole must take into account the context of our distinctive vantage points. And since no human being can know everything there is to know about the whole, Hayek argues persuasively that we cannot simply redesign it anew. We are as much the creatures of our context as we are its creators.

Hayek's rejection of utopianism is, then, a repudiation of the "constructivist" rationalism on which it relies. His critique of utopianism is a critique of the utopian's "pretense of knowledge," the attempt to construct a bridge to a future society using the imaginary bricks of an abstract, ahistorical, exaggerated sense of human possibility. While some have rightfully criticized Hayek's "limited" view of reason, I think that, ultimately, he was fighting *against* rationalistic, "one-sided exaggeration[s]" of the rational faculty ([1965] 1980, 95) and *for* "reason properly used," as he once claimed (1988, 8).⁷

For Hayek, utopianism is an abstract form of thought that separates its progressive goals from the sociohistorical context on which they genetically depend. Genuine radicalism, by contrast, is a form of unification. It recognizes the organic relationship between goals and context and seeks a resolution that is immanent to the conditions that exist. As such, it is opposed in principle to the deliberate construction of new institutional designs as if these were outside the historical process. It views social institutions as constituted by both human intentionality and unintended social consequences. By underemphasizing these distinctions, utopian resolutions must fail.

Elements of this Hayekian critique were anticipated by Karl Marx. Marx's singular achievement was his application of dialectics to the analysis of soci-

important about dialectics and would motivate the overall interest of his project. For who, after all, could reasonably deny the importance of the interplay between individuals and their conditions of communal life in understanding human existence?"

6. A definition and examination of "dialectics" as a species of this genus is the subject of Chapter 4.

7. For a good discussion of some of the problems in Hayek's work, see Sechrest 1998.

ety. In Marx's approach, the moment of inquiry, the centrality of factual demonstration, was essential to the dialectical project. Anchoring dialectics to investigations of the real world led Marx to indict the utopian socialists for their static *a priori* formulations. Their rationalist contrivances were oblivious to the existential conditions necessary for the achievement of human liberation, in Marx's view. Whether one agrees with Marx's substantive theories or not, his emphases on the interconnectedness of human actors in a structured social setting and on the organic unity of theory and practice were crucial to the evolution of dialectics as a tool for understanding—and changing—society.

Given the provocative parallels between Marx and Hayek, I concluded that their followers could learn much from their intellectual engagement with one another: Hayekians might be surprised to see in Marx a fellow traveler in the critique of utopianism; Marxists might be shocked to find in Hayek a profound dialectical sensibility.

Despite this commonality, Hayek and Marx part company in their assessments of the future. Although Hayek's approach has its inherent problems, his work provides an effective indictment of Marxism, not only as a statist political ideology, but also as a theoretical project. Marx recognized what I have called the "epistemic strictures"—or limitations on human knowledge—that utopians face. But he *historicized* these limitations, suggesting that history itself would resolve the problem of human ignorance. This Marxian vision of communism has two essential flaws:

(1) It presumes godlike planning and control and a mastery of the many sophisticated nuances, tacit practices, and unintended consequences of social action. But no human being and no group of human beings can possibly triumph over these spontaneous factors; they are partially constitutive of what we mean by "sociality." Those who attempt to build a road from earth to heaven are more likely to wind up in hell.

(2) It presumes a total grasp of history. Everything that *is* has a past and contains within it the seeds of many possible futures. While Marxists are correct to acknowledge that studying what *is* must necessarily entail an understanding of how it *came to be*, they often attempt to study the present as if from an *imagined* future. When Marxists suggest that history itself can lead to a triumph over human ignorance, they actually imply privileged access to total knowledge of future social conditions. This is not merely illegitimate; it is inherently utopian and profoundly *undialectical* insofar as it is unbounded by the context that exists.

It is this kind of totalism that a dialectical method repudiates. At root,

the desire for such omniscience is a distortion of the genuinely human need for efficacy. It is based on what Hayek (1973, 14) calls a “synoptic delusion,” a belief that one can live in a world in which every action produces consistent and predictable outcomes. Such a quest for total knowledge is equally a quest for totalitarian control. To the extent that Marxism has been a beacon for those trying to actualize such an impossibility, it has fueled a reactionary, rather than a progressive, social agenda—the aggrandizement of the state, the oppression of individual rights, and the fragmentation of groups in pursuit of political power.

Certain intellectuals of a “New Left,” such as Jürgen Habermas and Hilary Wainwright, have expressed awareness of the epistemological problems faced by Marxism, even though their own proposed resolutions have been ineffective.⁸ Taking his cue from Paul Berman (1996), Alan Ryan (1996, 39) notes, however, “the degree to which the libertarian, or Hayekian, defense of free markets, *laissez-faire*, and much-reduced government intervention appealed to the same distrust of centralized authority and bureaucratic regulation that the 1968 left had expressed.”

I have been an eyewitness to the provocative convergence of libertarian and socialist political activism, especially on the issue of world peace. During the 1960s and 1970s, for different reasons, libertarians and socialists burned their draft cards in protest against the war in Vietnam and the alleged garrison state it nourished. Nevertheless, socialists remained perplexed by libertarians and their apparent eclecticism. The libertarians were against what they characterized as “militarism,” and for the “free market.” They were against state regulation of the economy, while showing a similarly principled defense of people’s rights to all consensual social activities and relationships, including prostitution, gambling, drug use, and homosexuality. The libertarians seemed to be “liberal” on some issues and “conservative” on others.

In the late twentieth century, with the rise of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher and their powerfully enunciated free-market positions, libertarian ideas gained popularity with think tanks and Nobel committees alike. As a result, in the United States, the Cato Institute, the Institute for Humane Studies, the Ludwig von Mises Institute, and the Reason Foundation, among others, have become important to scholarly and public-policy debates. Several economists with libertarian views were awarded the Nobel

8. See Sciabarra 1995b, chap. 7. Advocates of “market socialism,” like Schweickart, Schwartz, and others, have taken notice of Hayek’s contributions. For an interesting debate among socialists on the nature of “market socialism,” see Ollman 1998b.

Prize, including Hayek, Milton Friedman, and James Buchanan. The Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick won the 1975 National Book Award for his philosophical explorations in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*,⁹ and books by Charles Murray (1997), David Boaz (1997a, 1997b), and Richard A. Epstein (1998) have further extended the discussion of libertarian ideas. And the impact of Ayn Rand continues to grow. Many of her original followers were, in fact, instrumental in the formation of a Libertarian Party in the United States, which, by 1980, had appeared on the presidential ballots of all fifty states—even if its electoral success has been less than impressive. Yet, as Pinkerton (1997, 21) tells us: “[W]ith the economic left in full retreat and the essentialist left mired in the trap of identity politics, with California and Arizona voting to legalize ‘medicinal’ marijuana, with the Internet functioning already as a government-free zone, with politicians routinely portrayed in the popular culture as fools—the moment would seem ripe for a popularizer to cobble disparate planks like these into a politically attractive platform of upward mobility for all.”

Such trends are significant because they fundamentally affect the ways in which we think about politics. Given the fact that tomorrow’s respectable “mainstream” often derives from yesterday’s “extremists,” I believe that libertarianism is an intellectual force to be reckoned with; its demands for a nonstatist, nonmilitarist, noncoercive polity have gradually shifted the locus of public debate. And to Western, especially American, culture, which has long celebrated market institutions, the libertarian’s progressive agenda, with its reliance on voluntarist principles, remains an appealing radical alternative to socialism.

But libertarianism is not without its critics. While G.A. Cohen (1996) pontificates over the meaning for Marxists of Nozick’s “self-ownership” theories, Brian Barry (1996) argues that not even Nozick takes his earlier work seriously anymore and that “most of the remaining believers are holed up in the backwoods of Montana or Idaho surrounded by large caches of heavy

9. Nozick (1989) later repudiated *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, characterizing it as one “young man’s ‘libertarian’ position” (17), “seriously inadequate, in part because it did not fully knit . . . humane considerations and joint cooperative activities. . . . Joint political action does not merely symbolically express our ties of concern, it also *constitutes* a relational tie itself” (286–88). Rothbard (1988g, 35) maintained that the impact of *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* was “dissipated” not by Nozick’s turnabout but by his “stubborn refusal to respond publicly to any of his host of critics.” Though Rothbard (1991b) was very critical of Nozick’s advocacy of the minimal state, he believed that this “systematic silence meant that Nozickian theories could not take on any sort of life in the profession; nor, in the absence of such continuing dialogue or argumentation, was Nozick able to develop followers or disciples” (19).