The Saga of the Libertarians

From Ayn Rand to Elon Musk

A review by Serge Schweitzer, Aix-Marseille Université
Christophe Bourseiller, La saga des Libertariens. D'Ayn Rand à Elon Musk
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"It is minorities that make History," writes Christophe Bourseiller. It is therefore no surprise that his new book turns to the libertarians. A few pages are even devoted to the PLIB, the author having taken the time to attend one of our meetings. Serge Schweitzer offers here, exclusively for the Parti Libertarien, a full review of the book, in bookshops since September.

Christophe Bourseiller has taken on a task that is both perilous and urgent. Admittedly, Henri Arvon (*Les libertariens américains : de l'anarchisme individualiste à l'anarcho-capitalisme*, PUF, 1983), Sébastien Caré (*La pensée libertarienne : Genèse, fondements et horizons d'une utopie libérale*, PUF, 2009), Mathilde Berger-Perrin (*Ayn Rand, L'égoïsme comme héroïsme*, Michalon, 2023), Pierre Lemieux (*Du libéralisme à l'anarcho-capitalisme*, PUF, 1983) and many others had paved the way. Above all, Alain Laurent has done so in a dozen books, displaying a command of the subject that is impressive for both its depth and its encyclopaedic breadth.

We ourselves examined the "virtue" of selfishness in "Fécondité de l'égoïsme et richesse économique" (in *Éthique et économie de marché*, Presses universitaires d'Aix-Marseille, 2012, series edited by Jean-Yves Naudet) and in our recent trilogy[1], where we devote long discussions to Murray Rothbard, and even more to Ayn Rand in volume two (see, for example, pp. 101-104), in which we hope to have shown, first, that "selfishness is not a mean sentiment" and, second, that "selfishness transcends altruism." In short, the academic literature in French is relatively abundant and can satisfy minds that are curious as well as demanding.

A book for everyone

The task Christophe Bourseiller has set himself is of a different nature. Convinced of the growing influence of this current, persuaded that minorities make history, passionate since always and in every field about marginal phenomena more than about marginal people, endowed with a vast and genuinely multidisciplinary culture, an original and readily dissident mind, resistant to intellectual fashions, a doctor of history, he wants to bring to the widest possible public the origins, vitality, interest, successes, failures, dazzling intuitions and eccentricities of a current whose parent company is in the United States, but whose subsidiaries are numerous and highly active, particularly in the former communist countries, and which for the first time holds power, with Javier Milei in Argentina.

That last point alone justifies the topicality of the subject. As for its interest: the "moderate" libertarians (they do exist) are the most advanced and dynamic edge of the liberal current, which must keep nourishing itself and keep solving the puzzles of how a spontaneous social order emerges. For while the collapse of the communist bloc left its faithful bewildered for a moment, the constructivists quickly reinvented themselves, many of them turning from red to green, and statists and interventionists remain numerous, and omnipresent where France is concerned. We are thus living through an unusual period. After the rivalry, competition and confrontation of solutions and paradigms in the economic order (planned economy versus market economy) and, in politics and the social order, of free societies against totalitarian ones, the total and crushing victory of solutions based on liberty, responsibility, property and the rule of law might suggest that capitalism and liberalism no longer had any serious or credible rivals. Yet, as Professor Alain Wolfelsperger has observed, never perhaps in two centuries of history has capitalism been so unanimously reviled, hated and condemned. It is tolerated only because it is, in everyone's eyes, the only system capable of filling the shelves of shops, but it is seen as resting on an unacceptable social order, denounced as detestable for the inequalities it carries, inequalities immediately transfused and relabelled as injustices. In short, a set of efficient solutions that are nonetheless deemed deeply immoral because driven solely by the lust for profit.[2]

The structure of the book

We shall examine in turn the path the author has chosen and the theses he defends, before weighing the book's strengths and weaknesses.

As for the structure, he wisely avoids superficial originality and, in four successive parts, guides the reader from the illustrious English-speaking ancestors (above all and essentially Americans of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Thomas Paine, Lysander Spooner, Benjamin Tucker, Henry David Thoreau) to the libertarians of Silicon Valley and Javier Milei.

The first part (pp. 33-81) is entitled "From Cowboy Individualism to the Republican Right." It covers the period from the New Deal to Barry Goldwater and introduces the uninitiated reader to Ayn Rand and Objectivism on the one hand, and to Murray Rothbard and the Austrian School on the other.

The second part (pp. 83-138) is titled "Enemies of the State?", with a curious question mark. The author recounts the countless, bewildering, even incomprehensible twists and turns of the libertarians, from left to right and back again. We see the Libertarian Party making progress despite many missteps, an Ayn Rand whose behaviour grows ever more baffling, sectarian and narcissistic, a Murray Rothbard drifting like a drunken boat in his foreign-policy choices; yet all of this nonetheless leads to Ronald Reagan (friend or foe?) and Ron Paul. The tragic events in Chile in September 1973 are also mentioned.

The third part is devoted to "The Techno-Libertarian Revolution, 1989-2000" (pp. 139-155). Here we first meet the "paleolibertarians," an opportunity for the author to introduce Hans-Hermann Hoppe; then, built on the paradigm of an exponential and unlimited development of science and technology, the idea of transhumanism, the pioneers of the Internet, and what Christophe Bourseiller calls the cyberlibertarians.

The fourth part is entitled “Marching Towards Power, from 2000 to the Present Day” (pp. 157-212). Once again around Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard, the Tea Party is summoned, along with Donald Trump, Elon Musk and the libertarian entrepreneurs of California, all the way to Latin America and the victory of Javier Milei.

The book ends with a conclusion entitled “A Minority That Succeeded” (pp. 213-226), in which the author discusses France (pp. 217-226). Then come the notes and references, a chronology, a selected bibliography, an index and the table of contents (pp. 227-267). The structure is simple. It has the merit of logic and the skill of weaving ideas and programmes into the chronology. In the history of libertarian ideas and the events flowing from them, a history of almost bewildering complexity, it would be easy to get lost. Yet the author keeps a firm grip on the reader's hand, and the reader rarely, if ever, loses his way in this thicket of outsiders and dissidents, full of flashes of brilliance and eccentricities, of brilliant, innovative, explosive and entrepreneurial personalities, and of stray dogs of every kind in search of reasons to live and justifications for existing.

The author's theses

If we now consider the theses that drive the author, we can detect a fairly standard, almost canonical case of “the irresistible attraction of the heart, tinged with the mistrust of reason.” Contrary to the adage, Christophe Bourseiller's heart is tamed by reason. He cannot long conceal that libertarians attract him as much as the honey pot attracts the bear cub.

Coming from the fringes of the far left, the author is an archetype of where the search for truth can lead. Still blind in the 1970s, as much through the influence of those around him as through studying philosophy at Nanterre in a predominantly Marxist atmosphere, he evolved quickly because he is not an ideologue. The facts forced him to accept the inconceivable and to acknowledge almost inexplicable errors of judgement. He then became France's leading specialist on the far left and ultra-left. To put it differently, he is practically the only person in France able to identify the smallest “anarcho-Trotskyist-Lambertist” current and trace its evolution from split to expulsion, from anathema to “people's” trial. More recently, he has turned his attention to the far right, from Vichy to the present day.

This detour was necessary to understand that what interests Christophe Bourseiller, almost passionately but lucidly, are the margins. At the margins one naturally finds pioneers, trailblazers, true prophets, high-flying intellectual speculators and entrepreneurs of every kind and in every field, but also, in large numbers, solitary figures, dissidents, curious and elusive people capable of sudden reversals, as well as a sizeable cohort of the unstable, the marginal and the downwardly mobile. In short, the individuals and bodies of doctrine he favours are those whose first motto is not the *In medio stat virtus* dear to the Romans. It was therefore written in advance that one day he would take an interest in the libertarians.

Not because of a passing fashion, the Milei effect, but quite simply because this current genuinely interests him and, truth be told, in some respects fascinates him. What he firmly and totally rejects, however, is not the libertarians' positions on social issues, often very progressive though not always (abortion being an example), but the very heart, the

nuclear reactor, of true libertarianism: pure anarchism, that is, the refusal of any state intervention in any circumstance or field. Bourseiller does not write it, but thinks it so strongly that one may infer that, if the most radical edge of the libertarians were the minarchists, he would be in clear sympathy; except, of course, that minarchists are liberals, very advanced ones to be sure, but no longer libertarians.

One need only quote the last lines of his book to know what the author thinks of chemically pure libertarians, those certified, if one dares bring the two together (for they cordially detested each other), as “Rando-Rothbardian”:

> *“In an age without compass or bearings, the followers of every-man-for-himself, of selfishness raised to a virtue and of laissez-faire can probably only proliferate. But should we rejoice? Defending liberty is right. But too much liberty is the absence of liberty.”*

The book's strengths

The book has many qualities. As for form, the style is fluid, the construction elegant, the words well chosen: learned when necessary, simple whenever possible. The four parts are admittedly of unequal length, but this cannot be held against the author since this is not a doctoral thesis. Les Éditions du Cerf have also done good work. The typeface is judiciously chosen, typos are few, and the price is moderate and affordable even for students. The author's short summaries at the start of each part are particularly pleasant and take the reader by the hand without patronising him. Apart from an opening table of contents, nothing is missing. The notes are abundant, the bibliography sufficient (despite a non-existent “Serge Carré” and a few debatable choices), and the index of names welcome. Only an *index rerum* is lacking.

As for substance, the information is abundant and broadly reliable. Christophe Bourseiller knows his subject. The value for money is beyond dispute. The author has not read everything (that is impossible in movements that constantly spawn new fanzines with precarious lives and confidential circulation), yet no French academic has read as much libertarian literature, including science fiction and works on risqué subjects. His knowledge of the United States and of American libertarians, many of whom he knows personally, is impressive. His deep temperament, that of a truant with no taboo subject, is of course perfectly suited to the territory under study. In sum, an excellent introduction for newcomers to libertarian thought. The wager is won, since this is not a book written for peers, or only for intellectuals or journalists, but deliberately a book for everyone and readable by everyone.

All these remarkable qualities, however, weigh little next to the author's extraordinary intellectual honesty. He reports and summarises what he has read, recounts what he has seen, and passes on what he knows and how he understood it (despite a few regrettable clichés, such as on Chile in 1973 and the “Chicago Boys”). At last, a book on the libertarians that is, at least in its original intentions, neither for the prosecution nor for the defence. In short, an exemplary investigation.

Two fundamental criticisms

This does not prevent the book from harbouring weaknesses which suggest how close the author came to writing a great and lasting book, and yet missed it. We shall pass over anecdotal errors (for example, the author of this review is said to have written his thesis on the Austrians under the supervision of the late Professor Jacques Garello; I am keen to render unto Dean Centi what is his)[3] in order to focus our substantive criticism on two themes: first, a profound misreading of the virtue of selfishness in Ayn Rand; second, for want of thorough training in economic analysis, the failure to grasp the consequences of the fact that the choice of system is a dichotomous one.

Considering Rand and her statements on selfishness (an ambiguous word given its connotations, it must be admitted), Christophe Bourseiller rightly insists on her neurotic personality, her sectarian streak and her unrelenting quest for academic recognition alongside the genuine triumph of her novels' sales. By a process of transfusion, this leads the author to seriously neglect Rand's philosophical significance, particularly in the passage entitled “The Questionable Virtues of Selfishness” (pp. 77 ff.). We believe, on the contrary, that it can easily be shown that selfishness enriches altruism (Jeremy Bentham), and furthermore that selfishness transcends altruism (Ayn Rand). Let us concentrate on the latter's thought.

Even before the book that became a classic, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, it is in *We the Living* (1936; French translation, Les Belles Lettres, 2023) that she sets out very clearly her confidence in the fruitfulness of a radical and total selfishness:

> *“Every man worthy of the name lives only for himself. He who does not, does not live. We can do nothing about it, since man is born that way, alone, whole, an end in himself.”*

Two years later, in *Anthem* (French translation, Les Belles Lettres, 2023), she writes:

> *“I am not a means to any end others may wish to accomplish... I am not a salve for their wounds. I am not a sacrifice on their altars. I owe nothing to my brothers... I ask none to live for me, nor do I live for any others.”*

The idea that we are born indebted to others is indeed a form of intellectual terrorism. She would refine her thought in a 1943 work, *The Fountainhead* (French translation, Plon, 2018):

> *“It is only by living for himself that man is able to achieve the works that are the glory of mankind... No man can live for another. The man who attempts to live for others is a dependent.”*

She condemns altruism radically:

> *“Altruism is the doctrine which demands that man live for others and place others above self. Sacrificing oneself to others is masochism as a moral ideal.”*

To Adam Smith's self-love, Ayn Rand adds self-interest. She crosses the Rubicon by making rational selfishness a virtue. Such is the title of the short essay *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964; French translation, Les Belles Lettres, 1993), in which one reads:

> *“The Objectivist ethics holds man's life as the standard of value, and his own life as the ethical purpose of every individual man. To live for one's own interest is man's highest*

moral purpose."

Altruism appears to her as a veritable Achilles' heel:

> *"Altruism is the ethics which regards man as a sacrificial animal, which holds that man has no right to exist for his own sake, that service to others is the only justification of his existence, and that self-sacrifice is his highest moral duty."*

She believes altruism must be hunted down, especially when it presents itself in compassionate guise. Overall, she sharply denounces the guilt that weighs on anyone who does not feel indebted to others, as well as the idea that one should repent for wanting to live one's own happiness. What Ayn Rand affirms is the nobility of signing one's own life and seeking one's own happiness, and the fact that no one is obliged to bow to the fashion of the day, which is to live for others. What she seems to want to denounce is the shame and guilt that weigh on those whose philosophy is to live first for themselves, but also by themselves and not at the expense of others (on all these subjects, we take the liberty of referring the reader to our trilogy published by the Presses Universitaires d'Aix-Marseille in 2023, 2024 and 2025).

The other fundamental criticism that may be levelled at Christophe Bourseiller's otherwise excellent book is that he did not take this opportunity to state and explain that, in terms of logic and intellectual consistency, there are only two possible, logical and acceptable positions on the choice of system: either imperative planning, or the position adopted by the libertarians.

On the question of the systems and structures that make it possible to find optimal procedures for harmonising and coordinating the dispersed choices of individuals, there are two solutions, and only two, that are theoretically conceivable. Communism, and trust in the all-powerful State, is one. The question of results is a different one. Imagining the social order in advance as an intellectual construction of the "new man" and the perfect society, that is, being a supporter of a constructed order that would not result from individuals' choices, is a theoretically possible and practically admissible solution. The system then rests entirely on centralisation under the direction of bureaucrats supposed to have the clear-sightedness and perspicacity to make the right choices for others, and in particular to answer the three questions: what, how and for whom to produce? That the results of these choices in the twentieth century were disappointing is another question, though one of vital importance, since it shows us what works and what fails. The other possibility rests on spontaneous order, decentralisation, the periphery, the market, the price system, free trade, profit, respect for contracts and the decisive role of law; in short, the trinity of liberty, responsibility and private property.

Intellectually, only two solutions exist. For one of two things is true: either the State is benevolent, and it must then be allowed to intervene everywhere and in everything; or it is malevolent, and then, at least in theory, it must be given no power at all. It is a matter of logic. The same institution cannot simultaneously be and not be. The State, or market procedures, cannot be at the same time, depending on circumstances or the mood of the times, malevolent or benevolent. In pure logic, it is not AND that prevails but OR. If man is a wolf to man, then a neutral force, accepted by society, is needed to separate the violent and prevent the Cains from killing the Abels. The State would then be the legitimate representative of the general interest and, in the minds of many contemporaries, would

restore justice where market outcomes produce inequalities, equated with injustices. If the State is at once benevolent, a reducer of violence and a bearer of justice, it must be given every possible power in every field, and the market must not be allowed to introduce distortions, inequalities, and human and planetary destruction. Being a statist and a communist is the first intellectual position that is perfectly logical, consistent and admissible.

Or, second hypothesis, the State, once it has obtained the monopoly of producing law and of legal violence, is the cause of bloody arbitrariness, of catastrophes, of the outbreak of wars, and of the theft of the work produced by human effort and genius. In short, if the State is so harmful and dangerous, it is disastrous to allow it to intervene in our lives and to let it grow exponentially. The choice of system is irrefutably dichotomous. One cannot sympathise here with state intervention and there with market procedures, here with despotism and there with the primacy of liberty.

The two theoretically admissible positions are to be a communist or to be a libertarian. It is simply a matter of rationality and of the logic of the human mind. Of course, if one moves from the theoretically conceivable, which is crucial for learning how to think, to the practically achievable, that is, from conceivable systems to real regimes, there may be state interventions in free societies and some spaces of liberty in statist orders. Being a socialist or a libertarian are the only two intellectually conceivable and logically correct solutions. This is why libertarian thought is not merely interesting but truly crucial, decisive, essential. It is a pity that Christophe Bourseiller did not seize the opportunity of a book on the libertarians to show that the importance of this intellectual family lies in what has just been described.

These two reservations, important as they are, must in no way overshadow what precedes: Christophe Bourseiller's *Saga of the Libertarians* is an important book which confirms that, in the marketplace of ideas and intellectual territories, he is a master and the finest journalist of these difficult subjects. An informed, brilliant, gripping and honest book. The wager of author and publisher is amply won. Rush to your bookshop to buy it, savour it, browse it and make your honey from it.

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Notes

1. Published by the Presses universitaires d'Aix-Marseille: *Le libéralisme : autopsie d'une incompréhension* (March 2023); *Le libéralisme : fragments d'une reconsidération* (March 2024); *Le libéralisme : jalons pour une reconstruction* (March 2025).

2. “L'ultralibéralisme ou le style paranoïde dans la critique,” *Commentaire*, no. 116, winter 2006-2007, pp. 909-918; and “L'attitude des médias de masse à l'égard du libéralisme économique,” *Journal des Économistes et des Études Humaines*, vol. 12, no. 4, December 2002, pp. 551-558.

3. Editor's note: the same goes for the President of the Parti Libertarien, Vadim, who is made ten years younger in the book!

Translator's note: quotations from Christophe Bourseiller and Ayn Rand are translated from the French text of the review and the French editions it cites; they may differ from the wording of the original English editions.