

approachable, and understandable. Here, *Custodians of the Internet* is an unqualified success. Whether you like the current crop of social media platforms or hate them, no book will better equip you to appraise their actions.

Will Duffield  
Cato Institute

### **What Is Classical Liberal History?**

Michael J. Douma and Phillip W. Magness, eds.  
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As an undergrad I knew well that professors in economics and even in political science were generally more tolerant of libertarian-sounding ideas than were the professors in my own major, history.

I consoled myself that it could always be worse—at least I wasn't in anthropology. But guidance on how to be a classical liberal historian was basically nonexistent. Sometimes I would find a book or two that seemed to have been written from something like a classical liberal perspective. Usually it happened by chance. No one taught me as an undergrad how to write in this mode, and no one encouraged me when I tried it. (Badly, I might add.)

My grad school mentors were more supportive than one might imagine, but even here—maybe especially here—I walked a lonely road. The books from the libertarian canon that I was reading in my free time often seemed like they came from a different universe from the books that I was reading for my classes. Connecting the two sometimes seemed impossible.

A lot has changed since then, both for good and ill. No surer mark of the change can be found than *What Is Classical Liberal History?*, a collection of historiographic essays edited by Michael J. Douma and Phillip W. Magness.

First, I want to ask, where was this book when I was in college? Essay after essay connects the discipline of history to the theoretical and methodological commitments of classical liberalism. Lenore T. Ealy's contribution in particular would have saved the early grad school version of myself much angst about what historians could, and should, be up to as they seek to take Austrian economics seriously. Far from banishing history, as is often imagined, Ealy shows that the Austrian school of economics situates history in a useful place and

gives it important work to do, the disdain of certain Austrians for the whole discipline notwithstanding.

Hans Eicholz's metahistorical essay builds a bridge from the mainstream of the discipline's disenchantment with Marxism—which has been deep but little discussed—through the linguistic and cultural turns of the late 20th century, and on toward a revival of straightforward narrative history. It has sprung up, one almost imagines, simply for lack of anything better to do. And yet a revived narrative history, one whose subject matter is more varied than the old-time narratives focused on war, statecraft, and great men, would be exactly the kind of history where we as classical liberals might feel most at home. Narratives still matter a good deal to us; the state, however, is not the idol that some of our predecessors have made it out to be, and our narratives need not march to its drum.

Other essays survey the historiographical work remaining to be done, which is vast and, in many areas, substantially unexplored. It is well known, for example, that the historiography of women is thoroughly dominated by identity politics and collectivist notions of personhood. Creating a classical liberal history of feminism and of women's progress toward full emancipation will still take a lot more hands-on archival work, as well as the work of publicizing and popularizing our views of the matter when they are finally and fully recorded. But before that happens, we need to roll up our sleeves, get into the archives, and write a whole lot more.

In the meantime, feminist history is difficult indeed to integrate with classical liberalism. "Reading many feminist histories," writes Sarah Skwire, "creates a . . . disorienting effect wherein history becomes a story of women's successes and failures at persuading the state to back their desires and preferences with force." The narrative structure that emerges in this type of history is whiggish, and perversely so: women and minorities have a predetermined trajectory of improvement to follow, one in which their success as human beings coincides with their ability to capture the state and to make it do things for them. Those who are ill disposed to the progress of women and minorities in the modern age might take this as an excuse, though not a reason, for their inclinations: people ought not to judge their own worth by *this*. Indeed, they shouldn't—but can't we tell some more fitting stories?

Something is obviously badly off when the path to self-actualization for all minorities is held, normatively, to be rent seeking. And, by the

same token, something is also badly off when the path to self-actualization for straight white cisgender males is the market, and when the market is seen as normatively *not* the domain of anyone else. The far left and far right both commonly share this identitarian account of the market; they disagree only on the normative valence of the market itself. (Classical liberals should agree with neither, of course.)

If we can't just kill everyone and start over, then I would settle for some better stories. Not only the stories of women and minorities in the capitalist world, but the stories of many others, in all times and places. One very definite weakness of this volume lies in its regional and temporal skew. Setting aside Leonid Krasnozhan and Mykola Bunyk's fine essay on classical liberalism in Eastern Europe, all contributions to the volume address either U.S. history or historical theory and method in a general sense. None examines events before the 18th century.

As an omnivorous reader of history, I might ask, where are the classical liberal treatments of colonialism in Africa and India? What about the Renaissance? Or ancient Greece? Or even the French Revolution? The latter, at least, is a subfield in which something like classical liberalism has actually prevailed in the academy. Since at least the bicentennial of that Revolution, the ideas of Alexis de Tocqueville have been newly verified, extended, and integrated into the core textbooks that are used to teach at the undergraduate level.

One group of essays in the volume criticizes the often lazy and manifestly incompetent work being done in the historical mainstream, such as it is. Editor Phillip Magness has written negatively elsewhere of the discipline of history, and of the American academy in general, in nearly apocalyptic terms. His essay in this volume does not disappoint. He notes the clumsy, badly conceived, and ultra-trendy academic fashion that links capitalism directly to slavery. Contemporaneous demurrals—from anti-slavery capitalists *and* from pro-slavery socialists—don't count for much to this school's proponents. Magness dissects the many leaps of logic and evidence required to sustain this fashion as anything like a viable account of the past. Particularly amusing are the often abortive attempts to define capitalism made by these "New Historians of Capitalism."

This may be somewhat embarrassing to classical liberal historians, but we also could stand to do better in defining capitalism. More even than economists, we may be well situated to tell the capitalist

story, because, unlike most economists, historians see writing narratives as a key part of their work. Telling good stories of social change, accurately and with proper documentary support, will always require an underlying ability simply to tell good stories.

Markets, apparently, have always been with us. Markets in finely divided, legally protected shares of the control over capital assets and the profits accruing to their owners—that's the new thing. Our historians should approach capitalism not as a system of exploitation, which it clearly is not, but as a system of *access*. In the bad old days, only a tiny few had any access at all to large accumulations of capital or to the benefits that such accumulations could produce. Under capitalism, a revolutionary thing has occurred: *anyone at all* can get access to a share of the returns on capital. From the perspective of world and comparative history, this is an utterly momentous development, one whose implications have not yet been adequately explored owing to the discipline's wasteful intellectual diversions, first to Marxism, and second to critical theory.

And we have not been on the job, perhaps, for as long as we think. Scott Shubitz's account of the transition from classical to modern liberalism in the United States is revelatory and theoretically useful, even while it suggests that much of the "classical liberalism" of the 19th century was only defined in retrospect. When it existed at all in contemporaries' awareness, Shubitz suggests that 19th-century American liberalism was more about *religious* liberalism and less about economics or individualism than we generally tend to think. Later reconstructions of classical liberalism, Shubitz argues, suffered from too much concern about then-contemporary economic issues, and hence, from a presentist focus.

All of this may be true, though it is admittedly a bit uncomfortable. None of it should detract from the project at hand, which is nothing less than the complete methodological and topical reconstruction of a discipline that is currently broken down and directionless. This project is wildly ambitious, but, then again, we classical liberals have in our own history undertaken many projects of an even greater ambition. It's almost enough to make me miss the academic grind.

Jason Kuznicki  
Cato Institute