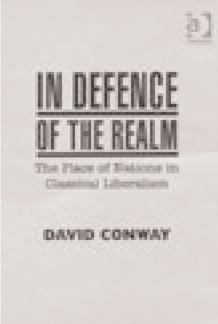
Book Reviews

In Defence of the Realm:
The Place of Nations in Classical Liberalism
by David Conway
Ashgate Publishing • 2004 • 210 pages • $79.95

Reviewed by Richard M. Ebeling



Classical liberalism is a universal philosophy of the social good. It argues that the individual should be recognized as possessing the fundamental rights to life, liberty, and property, which neither private individuals nor political authorities should be permitted to violate or abridge. The role of government in the classical-liberal ideal is protector and respecter of those rights, and very little else.

Classical liberalism is universal because the rights to life, liberty, and property are not reserved for any special people or nation. Every individual, everywhere and at any time, is entitled to those rights. For the classical liberal, history is the story of the struggle for liberty.

The tradition of liberty has been the heritage of only a tiny number of nations. Its focal point over the last several centuries has been Great Britain and the United States, with a few other countries in the shadow of their influence. And for a hundred years now, the tradition in those countries has been under constant attack by proponents of various forms of collectivism, from the mild to the extreme.

If this heritage were to be completely lost in those few countries, it would be a loss not only for them, but also for the entire world. How shall the heritage of liberty be preserved, therefore, in Great Britain and the United States? This is the question political philosopher David Conway attempts to answer in his recent work, *In Defence of the Realm: The Place of Nations in Classical Liberalism*.

Liberty is under attack, Conway warns, from the ideology of political correctness and multiculturalism. Government economic and social policies, and the curriculum in public schools, are undermining both the practice of liberty and any knowledge of its history and importance. The idea of group and collective "rights" based on race, gender, ethnicity, and social "class" has replaced the ideal of individual liberty. The ethics of coercive redistribution of wealth has superseded the principles of inviolate private property and self-responsibility.

What needs to be restored, Conway argues, is a national awareness of and patriotic pride in being a Briton or an American born into the ideal of liberty. In no way does Conway fall into the trap of "my country right or wrong." He would consider that a false and twisted sense of patriotism rightly understood.

He refers to and extensively quotes from leading figures of liberty over the last three centuries to demonstrate that it was once understood that what made someone a "real" Briton or American was the knowledge that his forebears had fought for personal, social, economic, and political liberty. That is what created much of the national identity, political loyalty, and social spirit in Britain and America.

The central question then arises over how that older sense of what it means to be an American (or a Briton) can be restored. The issue is not the desirability of a rebirth of a national spirit of liberty. (See Richard M. Ebeling, "What It Means to Be an American: Let Freedom Reign," *Notes from FEE*, November 2003.) The problem concerns the most appropriate means to that end.

Conway wishes to use the power of the state to move back in this direction. While he recognizes the rationale for privatizing education, he nevertheless proposes to use the existing public schools to educate young Britons and Americans about the true history of their countries. He wants to impose legal requirements to guarantee that English remains the national language. And he wishes to stem the flow and more selectively determine the patterns of immigration into the two countries.

The problem is that those means will fail and may very well make a restoration of the tradition of liberty even more difficult. Given the stranglehold that advocates of political correctness and multiculturalism have over the government's monopoly school system, the only way to undermine its power is for a growing number of people to opt out. The continuing growth of a parallel network of private schools and home-schooling families offers the better chance to liberate the minds of America's young from government propaganda. At the same time, a new generation will learn the morality and the practice of self-responsibility and self-improvement as foundation stones of a free society.

The power of a common language in reinforcing a sense of a shared identity certainly cannot be denied. But a government mandate is not consistent with the ideal of freedom. Instead, the drive should be for a repeal of laws that rigidly impose bi- or multilingual education and standards on society. Freedom of association and the gains from trade in the market should determine which or how many languages within the nation best serve the interests of the people. The selection of language should be left to the "invisible hand" of the free society, rather than the fist of government.

Finally, it is difficult to see how the principle of liberty can be consistently practiced if it does not include freedom of movement. Immigration laws, no matter what rules and standards may be used, remain a form of social engineering and political planning. There are presently a variety of perverse incentives at work in attracting some people into the United States (for example, various welfare-state benefits for which the new arrival may be immediately eligible), and policy reforms should aim to eliminate them. If the welfare state cannot be abolished in the near term, one method of limiting its influence would be to stipulate that all new immigrants are ineligible for welfare benefits of any sort for the first ten years they and their dependents reside in the United States.

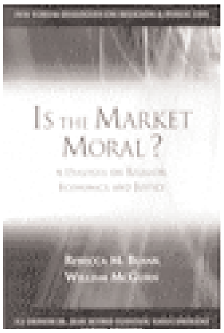
There has been a unique British and American character, and among its qualities has been a greater cultural and political appreciation of liberty. This is increasingly threatened today. If that heritage is to be preserved and enriched, the means must be consistent with the ideal.

Richard Ebeling is the president of FEE.

Is the Market Moral? A Dialogue on Religion, Economics, and Justice

by Rebecca M. Blank and William McGurn
Brookings Institution Press • 2004 • 151 pages • $16.95

Reviewed by James Otteson



Is the Market Moral? is a debate between economist Rebecca Blank and *Wall Street Journal* editor William McGurn not about the extent to which market economies are compatible with morality, as the slim volume's title suggests, but rather about the extent to which they are compatible with Christianity. Both Blank and McGurn are Christians, the former a Lutheran and the latter a Catholic; the book comprises their statements of their views and their responses to each other.

Despite her acknowledgment that "there is no viable alternative to the market as an organizing principle for an economic system in a complex society," Blank believes that "there are a variety of justifications for government action beyond those conventionally recognized by economists." In support of the first claim, Blank lists several advantages of market economies: proper alignment of incentives, efficiency, and decentralized decision-making. She also raises standard problems, however, like asymmetrical information, externalities, public goods, and monopolies, which she argues require government intervention. Still, her claim is that the government's role is to help keep the market competitive, not to replace it or pervert its generally beneficial structure.

But when she turns her attention to the market's concordance with Christian principles, she finds it more seriously lacking. She argues that whereas the market concentrates only on individuals, Christianity focuses on both individuals and communities; whereas the market calls on us only to be self-interested, Christianity calls on us to be "other-interested"; whereas the market tells us that "more is better," Christianity tells us that sometimes less is more; whereas the market tells us that any good may be produced for which there is a demand, Christianity cannot view all choices as morally neutral; and, finally, whereas the market "ignores the poor because they are not participants," Christianity "brings them into the center of community concern."

I find these criticisms unpersuasive and in some cases juvenile. It is not "the market" that makes a person selfish, immoral, un-Christian, or callous toward the poor; all the market does is allow people the freedom to make their own decisions. The morality, or immorality, of those decisions is thus on their own shoulders.

Blank goes on to suggest that the government must, in addition to merely keeping markets competitive, ensure "reasonable hours, a safe work environment, and fair repayment" for labor, enforce "nondiscriminatory and nonabusive work practices," and address "the environmental problems that widespread economic growth often has caused." It would seem that the Christian government, according to Blank, is very nearly the expansive welfare state we already have in the United States today.

In his turn, McGurn's defense of the morality, or Christianity, of markets is good as far as it goes, but it lacks the systematic rigor to really make the case. So, for example, he notes the obvious point that "for the poor the real danger is almost never markets and almost always the absence of them." He repeatedly uses Hong Kong as an instructive example, and to link his position to Christianity (or at least a certain version of it), he makes frequent reference to Pope John Paul II's qualified defense of markets and qualified rejection of socialism.

Those are fine points to make, but they are too frequently tied to a specific worldview—Pope John Paul II's, for example—to make them persuasive generally. Blank's criticisms of markets, though ostensibly arising from her Lutheran Christianity, are in reality criticisms that people of many religious stripes raise. Hence they need to be addressed in general terms. This can be done, but McGurn's responses, though occasionally insightful and generally on the right track, are not quite up to the task. At one pivotal moment, McGurn actually agrees with Blank that the market depends on moral virtues "that it cannot create itself" and that it must, therefore, be superintended by the state.

The topic is an important one, but the book disappoints. Its criticisms of market economies are nothing new, occasionally border on silly, and display little awareness of obvious responses. And because its defenses of the market don't make a general case, but instead largely rely on particular anecdotal examples, the book is not a significant contribution to the debate of these issues.

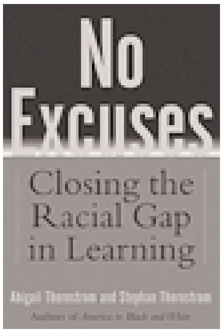
Readers looking for a better defense of the morality of capitalism should try Henry Hazlitt's classic *The Foundations of Morality*, especially the chapter "The Ethics of Capitalism."

James Otteson teaches philosophy at the University of Alabama and is the author of Adam Smith's Marketplace of Life.

No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning

by Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom
Simon & Schuster • 2003/2004 • 334 pages
$26 hardcover, $15 paperback

Reviewed by Karen Y. Palasek


No
Excuses
Closing the Racial Gap in Learning
Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom
Authors of America in Black and White

In *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*, the Thernstroms offer a thoughtful discussion of why public schools have failed, and are likely to continue to fail, to close the achievement gap between races. They cite institutional barriers and the lack of proper incentives as roadblocks to educational excellence in the public schools. Unfortunately, the authors stop short of identifying the most fundamental obstacle to improvement: government-run schooling itself.

Effective public schools are the exception rather than the rule, the Thernstroms report. A few public schools have managed to involve parents, to impose exacting standards on teachers and students, and to build academic skills in pupils at high risk for falling even further behind.

Those "wonderful schools" have a common thread. All are charter schools, and in most cases, part of the Knowledge Is Power Program, known as KIPP academies. While still part of the public-school system, charter schools are somewhat less regulated and receive less public funding than traditional public schools. KIPP schools demand contracts from students, teachers, and parents, and follow through with consequences if someone fails to keep his end of the bargain. These schools mimic, as far as possible, the attention, time, and commitment available in private education, but tend to serve children who have made little academic headway in traditional public schools. Competition for seats at KIPP schools motivates attendance, study, and behavior. And since charter schools are available on a limited basis within the public system, these demanding schools can afford to enforce the rules. The bottom line: KIPP schools get results. Compared to their traditional public-school counterparts, black students at KIPP academies are steadily narrowing the black-white learning gap.

Traditional schools have their hands tied in a number of ways that prevent them from being effective. The authors cite teacher unions, with seniority and tenure demands, lockstep pay grades, and control of teacher-education programs, as the most significant stumbling blocks. Instead of trying to remove those obstacles, however, the Thernstroms would like to see reforms that can only be implemented, at present, in a charter-school setting: performance and subject-based pay differentials, and an emphasis on teacher expertise rather than education credentials.

Can KIPP-style charter schools turn public education around? The success of KIPP academies would seem to make a credible case for increasing the number of charter schools. The authors contend that "every urban school should become a charter."

Of course, a wholesale conversion of traditional public schools into charters would depose the existing education bureaucracy and invite great resistance, regardless of student success. "The job of unions is to protect the interests of teachers," the authors note, while "the job of schools is to educate the students." But, they add sardonically, "What's good for unions is not necessarily what's good for kids."

Despite its excellent analysis of why a large racial achievement gap exists in "public education," *No Excuses* unfortunately remains wedded to the notion that public schools should continue to deliver the lion's share of K–12 education in the United States. Suggested reforms never get outside the "box" of state education. The authors prefer to refurnish government education with better tests, more vigorous standards, higher pay to attract better qualified teachers, and somewhat fewer regulations, rather than look outside the government-schooling system itself. What they offer is a vision of public education populated by charter schools, with greater freedom of choice for parents and market-driven incentives to train, hire, and pay for excellent teachers and superior academic results. If charter schools expand, the authors contend, American public education can be remade in a better form.

But their solution falls short. For example, if the federal No Child Left Behind law was "envisioned as a means of circumventing the many obstacles to change" imposed by unions, it has made some aspects of public education even more inflexible than before. This is particularly true for teacher qualifications.

In the end, the authors of *No Excuses* are stumped. They cannot embrace an unregulated private market for education or see a nongovernment solution to the racial learning gap. This leaves them with little more to anticipate than a bitter contest over who will eventually control the contents of the government-education box.

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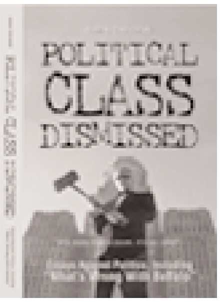
Political Class Dismissed: Essays Against Politics

by James Ostrowski
Cazenovia Books • 2004 • 352 pages • $15.00 paperback

Reviewed by George C. Leef



People have arrived at the freedom philosophy through a great many intellectual paths. Lawyer James Ostrowski was a conventional liberal of the George McGovern stripe until after graduating from college. He harbored some strong civil libertarian beliefs, but by his own admission lacked a comprehensive political philosophy and was clueless about the fundamentals of economics. "Then," he writes, "I stumbled upon Ayn Rand's essays, which knocked the liberal wind right out of me."

Hooked on free-market thinking, Ostrowski began to read Murray Rothbard and other libertarian writers. While a student at Brooklyn Law School, he invited Rothbard to give a talk on the Reagan administration, a talk that bewildered most of the students since he criticized Reagan from "the right" for not doing nearly enough to downsize government and reduce taxation, and from "the left" for continuing numerous government assaults on civil liberties. Ostrowski was not at all bewildered, since he had come to understand the consistency of Rothbard's arguments in favor of liberty.

After embarking on a legal career that has included several brushes with the political establishment, Ostrowski discovered his considerable talent as an essayist and has developed into something of a modern-day Thomas Paine. *Political Class Dismissed* gathers together 50 of his essays published from 1992 to 2003. They cover a wide array of political and economic topics, all written from a solidly libertarian viewpoint and administering a powerful assault on the prevailing statist orthodoxy.

The first and longest essay in the book is titled "What's Wrong with Buffalo." Ostrowski was born and raised in Buffalo, N.Y., and has seen the city continually decline over his lifetime. He pulls no punches in identifying the cause: the corrupt political machine that has dominated local politics for decades. He explains:

> In a modern economy, capital is mobile and flows to where it can make the greatest profit. *Buffalo is not that place*. Buffalo is not the place where *new* capital will be invested. Buffalo is the place where *old* capital, fully depreciated, will be abandoned. . . . Ironically, these dire consequences actually strengthened the corrupt local political elites. First, independent-minded persons of means, the political machine's natural enemies, are driven away. . . . Many of the businessmen who remain are bought off with grants, contracts, special tax breaks, and regulatory and prosecutorial leniency. Second, with the decline of the economy, the goodies offered by politics are seen as more attractive.

Politics has transformed Buffalo from a vibrant city attractive to entrepreneurs to a stagnant place where the coin of the realm is political pull. (Ostrowski reminds readers that Grover Cleveland, arguably the nation's least interventionist president, was once the mayor of Buffalo.) This indictment of Buffalo's politicized world is devastating. If anyone thinks the libertarian critique of government intervention and corruption is merely theoretical, a reading of "What's Wrong with Buffalo" will destroy that notion.

Turn to any of the other essays in the book and you will be treated to similarly unflinching analysis. Ostrowski is, for example, an indefatigable opponent of the "war on drugs." In "Leave Robert Downey, Jr. Alone," he writes, "In the future, people will consider our age's 'war on drugs' to be as evil and stupid as we now view the war on witches that occurred 400 years ago in early *modern* Europe." Rather than "protecting society," as the drug warriors claim they're doing, Ostrowski contends that they are merely indulging in one of mankind's oldest and worst vices, namely pushing peaceful people around.

As a lawyer, Ostrowski has interesting thoughts on our legal system. His essay "Judging the Jury" is a sharp attack on the jury system. Originally, the institution of trial by jury was a check on the power of the state.

Alas, juries now are part of the coercive apparatus of the government. As Ostrowski explains, this is because they have been stripped of their historical right to judge the law as well as to find the facts of a case. Furthermore, "juries are now packed with people who make a living from government work or depend on the government for much of their income." Most people won't bite the hand that feeds them.

One of my favorite chapters is "Henry David Thoreau: Libertarian." Ostrowski shows that while "liberals" often claim him, Thoreau's radically anti-statist philosophy would have put him at odds with nearly everything modern liberalism embraces.

Political Class Dismissed sparkles with iconoclastic writing that slams the conventional political and economic thinking at every turn. Libertarians will love it. Conservatives and liberals will find it a constant challenge.

George C. Leef is the book review editor of The Freeman.