



BY DAVID BOAZ

“When libertarians defend limited government, we are defending freedom and the progress it brings.”

Editorial The Joys of Freedom

A colleague tells me that we’re too negative here at the Cato Institute; we spend too much time talking about the depredations of government rather than the benefits of freedom, even *The Joy of Freedom*, as David Henderson put it.

That’s probably true of my own book *The Politics of Freedom*. So to start the new year, I want to talk about freedom, not politics.

Sometimes libertarians and our critics, arguing over what kind of rules are needed to ensure social harmony, forget just how much of our life is in fact free. We make thousands of choices every day, engage in thousands of interactions with others, without any coercion. That’s a powerful demonstration of the central place of freedom in our lives, and the ability of people to create peace and order without central direction.

It’s not easy to define freedom. Leonard Read said, “Freedom is the absence of man-concocted restraints against the release of creative energy.” Hayek referred to “a state in which each can use his knowledge for his purposes.” Tom G. Palmer is partial to this description from John Locke:

[T]he end of Law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge Freedom: For in all the states of created beings capable of Laws, where there is no Law, there is no Freedom. For Liberty is to be free from restraint and violence from others which cannot be, where there is no Law: But Freedom is not, as we are told, A Liberty for every Man to do what he lists: (For who could be free, when every other Man’s Humour might domineer over him?) But a Liberty to dispose, and order, as he lists, his Persons, Actions, Possessions, and his whole Property, within the Allowance of those Laws under which he is; and therein not to be subject to the arbitrary Will of another, but freely follow his own. (*Second Treatise on Government*, sec. 57; discussed in Palmer, *Realizing Freedom*.)

That is, a free person is not “subject to the arbitrary will of another” and is free to do as he chooses with his own person and property. But you can only have those freedoms when the law protects your freedom and everyone else’s.

However we define freedom, we can certainly recognize aspects of it. Freedom means respecting the moral autonomy of each person, seeing each person as the owner of his or her own life, and each free to make the important decisions about his life.

Freedom gives meaning to our lives; indeed, it allows us to define our own meaning, to define what’s important to us. Justice Antonin Scalia mocked his colleague Anthony Kennedy for writing, “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own

concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe and the mystery of human life.” But surely (whatever its relevance to constitutional jurisprudence) that is a part of freedom.

And thus each of us should be free to think, to speak, to write, to create, to marry, to eat and drink and smoke, to start and run a business, to associate with others as we choose. Freedom is the foundation of our ability to construct our lives as we see fit.

The social consequences of freedom are equally desirable. Freedom leads to social harmony. We have less conflict when we have fewer specific rules about how we should live—in terms of class or caste, religion, dress, lifestyle, or schools.

Economic freedom means that people are free to produce and to exchange with others. Freely negotiated and agreed-upon prices carry information throughout the economy about what people want and what can be done more efficiently. As Henry Hazlitt put it, for an economic order to function, prices must be free to tell the truth. A free economy gives people incentives to invent, innovate, and produce more goods and services for the whole society. That means more satisfaction of more wants, a higher standard of living for everyone, and more economic growth.

And that process has taken us in barely 250 years of economic freedom from the back-breaking labor and short life expectancy that were the natural lot of mankind since time immemorial to the abundance we see around us today in more and more parts of the world (though not yet enough of the world).

The country singer Brad Paisley’s video, “Welcome to the Future,” captures a lot of this. It’s an ode to commerce, technology, achievement, social change, and cultural diversity. (The video makes that clearer than the song itself. And also check out his “American Saturday Night,” a celebration of trade and immigration.)

Ancient man was just as smart as we are. So what’s changed? Freedom. A political system of liberty gives us the opportunity to use our talents and to cooperate with others to create and produce, with the help of a few simple institutions that protect our rights. And those simple institutions—property rights, the rule of law, a prohibition on the initiation of force—make possible invention, innovation, and progress in commerce, technology, and styles of living. When libertarians defend limited government, we are defending freedom and the progress it brings.