



THE LIBERTARIANISM OF  
**CHARLES  
 MURRAY:**  
 AN APPRECIATION

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The recent publication of Charles Murray's *What It Means To Be A Libertarian: A Personal Interpretation* (Broadway Books, New York, 1997 — all quotes here are from this book) is a major boost for the libertarian movement worldwide.

Many libertarians, especially American ones, start with the personal and only later get political. They pay too much tax. They're gay and the politicians are disrespectful. They want to drive at more than 55 mph, take a wierd drug, avoid a war, discriminate against a woman or watch some porn, and from that kernel of violated individuality they work their way upwards and outwards to full-blown libertarianism. A few years on, they're snarling about the costs of federal entitlement programs and orating statistics about the unwinnability of the war on drugs.

Charles Murray began as a classic participant observer of public policy. It was the failures of these policies that made him a libertarian. Only now has he distressed his conservative friends by writing a book with a chapter in it called "Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll" which starts with the following proposal:

*Federal and state laws regarding alcohol, drugs, prostitution, gambling, and pornography are repealed ...* (p. 102)

**"INCALCULABLE HUMAN SUFFERING"**

*Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980* (Basic Books, New York, 1984), Murray's first big attention grabbing book, was about the failures and contradictions of the American welfare state. In it, he proposed a thought experiment. If this welfare state didn't exist, then what? He liked the answers, because now he says: let's do that for real.

The entry of government into social insurance and then into a broader range of social interventions has caused incalculable human suffering. It has not produced a society in which fewer people are dependent than would otherwise have been the case. The welfare state has artificially, needlessly created a large dependent class. At the bottom is the underclass, stripped of dignity and autonomy, producing new generations socialized to their parents behavior.

There is no excuse for what has happened except the excuse of good intentions, and even that is a lame one. ...

(p. 126)

Murray tells how he flirted with Milton Friedman's Negative Income Tax idea, but then we read:

End government transfer payments, in cash, in kind, or services. Do not substitute less coercive government programs for the ones we have now. Do not try to make the best of a bad situation. Dismantle every vestige of the state social insurance and welfare apparatus and constitutionally forbid its reappearance. (p. 130)

**GOVERNMENT VERSUS SOCIETY**

A key insight into Murray's thought processes is to be found in his second and least publicly discussed book, *In Pursuit: Of Happiness and Good Government* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1988). He tells of how he worked for two years in the Peace Corps in the villages of Thailand, and how, to his consternation, he encountered hostility from the citizenry of the villages. How come? He was giving them money, bestowing bounty upon them. Well, yes, but his projects never seemed to get anywhere, and he was also screwing around with the local power structure, turning a local community, with an elaborate system of personal status based on how much you contributed to local welfare, into a mere aggregation of welfare supplicants. The village elders didn't like it, and Murray came around to agreeing with them.

If you put the government in charge of doing all the things formerly done by the local community, then say goodbye to the local community. Community becomes a mere word, for a bunch of people who exist and sleep near to each other, in the same dormitory so to speak, but who no longer have any meaningful social relationships with each. And it is in these kinds of relationships, says Murray, that most people find their deepest pleasures in life. Most people don't become supermodels or vice-presidents of major corporations, and make a stack of money so huge that they can just buy their way out of their demoralised and degenerating localities. Most people find their places in the world by being good sons and daughters, good parents, good neighbours and good local citizens. Even corporate vice-presidents often wish when they get older that they'd paid more attention to family and friends and neighbours, and less to getting ahead at work. Murray's libertarianism is the claim that citizenship should stop being a nationalised industry.

It's not that he wants no pressure put on drug dealers or other degenerates. He wants to win the war on drugs. But, he wants to do it with social pressures, not laws and government bureaucracies. Let employers and landlords make judgements about their employees and their tenants, rewarding the decent citizens and punishing the selfish and lawless parasites.

The way he puts it is: if you want your kid to go to a drug-free school, which is better? A massive nation-wide program to rid all American schools of drugs, or your local school governors having the right to expell drug takers and drug dealers from their school, and you having the right to pick that school for your kid?

Some libertarians are almost as resentful about social pressures as they are of government commands. The usual complaint about radical individualists is that we exult that there is no such thing as society. For Murray, if there's no such thing as society then that's a disaster, and one that should be reversed.

The idea that we are our brothers' keepers has been used so flabbily, for so many destructive schemes, that one has a strong impulse to say, "The hell I am." But the Bible cannot be held responsible for its misuse by twentieth century politicians, and the whining by twentieth-century social democrats that no one is responsible for his fate should not provoke libertarians into saying that anyone can stand on his own two feet if he has a little gumption. We all need a little help from our friends, and some of us need a great

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deal. What becomes of those who are helpless, or luckless, or perhaps simply feckless, must deeply concern any human being worth of the name. (p. 125)

Amen.

### CELEBRITY VIA NOTORIETY

With his talk of an emerging “underclass” Murray had created an intellectual battle ground upon which others — and not just other Americans — have been eager to engage one another (“As Charles Murray says”, or “As the notorious Charles Murray says”, according to taste). So manifestly outrageous and manifestly malevolent did his claims about the underclass seem to his opponents that the usual procedure — ignoring criticism of statist welfare measures as beneath the need for a reply — was set aside, and Murray became a major intellectual celebrity, in a way which the welfarists surely now regret. And when *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class in American Life* (with Richard J. Herrnstein, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1994) came out the waste matter really hit the fan. This book is not centrally about the notion that different racial groups differ in average intellectual capacity, but this claim was briefly discussed, and Murray’s enemies now felt they had the perfect ammunition to finish him off. This, they said, is just a fancy way of shouting “Nigger!” But Murray stood his ground, and as a result of that huge row became something very close to an American household name.

What *The Bell Curve* is about is the increasing importance of intellectual facility in determining life chances in the modern world. Fifty years ago, the top American colleges would choose their students from the children of the local aristocracy, the smarter ones admittedly, but including also some dumb ones. Now, the best colleges pick the smartest kids from all over America. If you could now choose whether to be rich and dumb or poor and smart, go with smart and let the money take care of itself, which it will. America is now becoming dominated by a clever but not especially wise elite, who run things to suit themselves but in ways which often hurt others a lot.

### REGULATION

Which brings us to another great continuing theme in Charles Murray’s writing: the pernicious growth of government regulation. Smart people working for big, rich corporations are interfered with by government regulations, but not remotely as much as the many smaller businesses run by the less smart masses. So, competitively speaking, government regulations help those clever enough to understand them and how to handle them.

Murray spends a great deal of the small number of pages he has allowed himself in *What It Means To Be A Libertarian* on regulation, and he’s surely right to do so. Regulation is now a crucial battleground between big and limited government. We’ve won on the ownership of the economy. If anything is to get done, there has to be “free enterprise”. Only a few Stalinoid freaks deny that. The government can’t control *everything*, make *every* decision. But most still suppose that “free” enterprise must still be controlled, reigned in, rendered un-extreme, and taxed *half* to death even if not the whole way.

No says Murray. Give all businesses the right to opt out of government regulations, provided only that they say so to their customers, and continue to face the usual common law restraints about negligence, fraud and so on. Then we’ll see how much good the existing regulations do, and how much harm. Most regulations, says Murray, would evaporate.

### CONCESSIONS

As I say, *What It Means To Be A Libertarian* is a short book, and it doesn’t deal with everything. Murray ignores guns, and foreign policy, for example. The proposal quoted above about how “Federal and state laws regarding alcohol, drugs, prostitution, gambling, and pornography are repealed” continues thus:

... are repealed, except for provisions regarding minors.

(p. 102)

He has entirely orthodox views about parental rights, duties, pleasures and pains. His concern is merely that a state dominated world isn’t the place where the orthodox parental virtues will flourish. To pay for education, he favours education vouchers rather than plain old money, a grievous concession to statism, because vouchers mean government officials still deciding what education is. But the bigger point to keep hold of is that such concessions don’t set the tone of this book.

### LIVE AND LET LIVE

Although Murray’s experience and policy examples are all firmly rooted in the USA, what he says is of universal appeal. I’ll end with one of my favorite passages. (By the way, notice that the work of Adam Smith that he cites is not *The Wealth of Nations*).

The relationship between tolerance and freedom is inherent. Intolerance is underwritten by government favoritism and violence. When people are free — meaning that they are also necessarily deprived of the use of force — they find ways to get along.

The view of human nature behind that statement is one that Adam Smith laid out two centuries ago in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. It seems more persuasive, not less, as the modern behavioral sciences learn more about what makes human beings tick.

Human beings are social animals, Smith argued. We desire the approval of other people — “approbation,” in Smith’s language. Human beings are also self-regarding, pursuing their self-interest narrowly defined. In addition, we have instincts that lead us to value our own family’s well-being above that of people who are not family, to value our friends’ well-being above that of strangers.

Taken together, these qualities leave human beings with compelling motivations to cooperate, to be generous, and to be tolerant if they are deprived of the use of force. Taken together, these same qualities leave human beings capable of every kind of exploitation and atrocity if they are given access to the use of force.

The conclusion follows directly from the nature of force. If I can use force to get what I want, I can live two lives — exploiting other human beings to satisfy my narrowly defined self-interest and finding companionship and approval among the others who are my collaborators in oppressing others.

If I cannot use force, everything I get has to be given voluntarily. To satisfy my material needs, I must persuade other people to trade with me. To satisfy my needs for companionship, I must behave in ways that make others want me to be part of their community. In both cases I must offer something to others that they value at least as much as the thing that they give me. The link between freedom and tolerance does not depend on people’s perfectibility. It does not even require that human beings have a moral sense. It recognizes that, given the opportunity, human beings will exploit each other. Libertarians make this one simple claim, which can be successfully matched against mankind’s long empirical record: Deprived of the use of force, human beings tend to cooperate. Literally and figuratively, they live and let live. (pp. 80-81)

Amen again. Charles Murray is a huge name, and this is a huge book, all the huger for being so short (just 178 pages). Not only are people now buying it by the truck-load; they’re also — surely — reading it. It’s tricked out to look like a prayer book, with pages that look hand cut and with an old fashioned looking cover design. LA Director Chris Tame has over the last few years been compiling a computer file of libertarian quotes, of the sort which either have echoed down the centuries, or which should. Chris will have his work cut out with this book, because paragraphs deserving of his attention are to be found on virtually every page.