

WHY I GIVE LIBERTARIAN BOOKS TO LIBRARIES

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Ideas have consequences. Some have been disastrous (Marxism, Fascism), some beneficial (Natural Rights theory, classical liberalism, etc). Yet for ideas to have an impact two essential ingredients are necessary. There needs to be an audience and (one could not exist without the other) there needs to be a medium. While both ingredients are necessary, however, one is of more consequence than the other. An audience is fairly static and remains to be moulded by the medium. Therefore, what that medium says is of great importance to the historical development of societies. In other words, the written word greatly influences whether societies progress under statist assumptions and beliefs or whether a more libertarian polity is advanced.

WHILE PUBLIC LIBRARIES EXIST ...

This must all seem fairly trite and obvious to the reader, but it does suggest one fairly easy way in which libertarian and non-collectivist ideas can be spread, particularly by those currently studying at university. Simply put, the greatest concentration of written works are to be found (excluding commercial bookshops) in public and university libraries. For those who use them libraries have the advantage over

high-street stores in that books can be picked up for free. Whether taxpayers should be forced to subsidise the reading habits of many who could well afford to pay charges is a point on which many libertarians may well hold strong opinions. Nevertheless, while public libraries do exist they offer an ample opportunity to influence the reading habits of those who use them. This is a point I feel the Left must have picked up on years ago judging by the plethora of collectivist polemics one comes across in most public libraries. This is an unfortunate state of affairs for the obvious reason that those who go to the library for information (particularly in the social sciences) have little choice but to make do with the many books that either overtly or subtly express left-leaning views on the topic in question.

THE DEARTH OF CLASSICAL LIBERAL AND LIBERTARIAN LITERATURE

Yet this need not be the case. I have no idea why there exists a near-monopoly of socialist literature on most social science shelves in libraries but it is not an irreversible state of affairs. When I first arrived at college in 1989 (the City of London Polytechnic) I made much use of the library in order to research ma-

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

terial for the essays I had been set. (Incidentally, by this time I had already converted myself from being a mild conservative into a ranting 'loony libbo', as my liberal detractors insisted on labelling me, the left just called me a fascist, which gives you some indication of the level of intellectual discourse in some seminar gatherings.) Yet more than the ridicule, what disheartened me most was the real dearth of classical liberal and libertarian literature available for me to use as background material. Granted, there were a small number of books that propagated a free market agenda. Authors such as Milton Friedman, Karl Popper and Friedrich Hayek were available, prestigious academics that college libraries could not seriously ignore. Yet this hardly exhausts the prodigious pantheon of liberal authors one can draw upon, and even they were hardly visible on library shelves groaning under the weight of collectivist polemics. This angered me. So in some small way I decided to set about correcting this appalling deficiency.

Over the years I had built up quite an impressive libertarian collection of my own. These were mainly books I had picked up for cheap in the many second-hand bookshops one can visit in London. One other valuable source for libertarian literature was the Economists' Bookshop in Holborn. Besides an excellent second-hand book department they also stock all the latest Institute of Economic Affairs publications and many other works I had not come across previously. For example, The Economists' is the British distributor of Liberty Press publications. Liberty Press books are produced by Liberty Fund Inc. (7440 North Shadeland, Indianapolis, Indiana 46250, USA), an American free market foundation that publishes essential conservative and classical liberal works, beautifully produced and absurdly cheap for what you get. They also make available books by American and European authors that, at least to my knowledge, had not previously been readily available in this country.

MANY MORE WOULD LEARN ABOUT LIBERTARIANISM

While this large number of books I had amassed over a period of time proved to be an invaluable source of alternative views to the usual statist platitudes one comes across in student essays, it slowly began to dawn on me that I was the only one benefiting from such a fine collection. And while many books provided me with a constant source of reference material an equally large number were read once and then placed on a shelf to gather dust for months on end. It therefore occurred to me that if I donated those books to public and college libraries many more people would have the opportunity to gain a knowledge of libertarian perspectives previously denied them.

So this is precisely what I began to do. Libraries (like all publicly funded bodies) complain of underfunding and a shortage of money to purchase books so I began

to donate mine, and they were gratefully received. Moreover, a greater abundance of libertarian literature on library shelves cannot but have beneficial consequences for the spread of free market thought, particularly amongst the young and university students who are at an age when they are most amenable to new (and radical) influences. While exceptions certainly exist it is a general truism that opinions formed in one's youth are often held into old age. Therefore it is of the greatest importance that students, etc, are made aware of the rich tradition in classical liberal thought that currently exists. Indeed, I am sure there are still those who do not even realise that there is an alternative to government provision in many fields of social responsibility. Yet one can hardly blame them when the vast majority of material they come across in libraries consists of collectivist drivel.

INTELLECTUALLY DEMANDING ARGUMENTS

More free market material available in public libraries should serve two functions. Ideally, an exposure to libertarian thought may convert an intelligent few. Even if this were not the case, those with socialist inclinations would have to confront intellectually demanding arguments and the fact that they do not possess a monopoly on moral virtue or political wisdom.

What impact a greater preponderance of libertarian literature on library shelves will have on those who use library services is empirically impossible to verify. But that it will have some impact cannot be denied. Nothing gave me greater pleasure at college than looking up books that I had donated months earlier only to find that they were already on loan. Even when I found books still on the shelves it gave me great satisfaction to discover that they had previously been on loan on numerous occasions. The message must be getting through to someone!

THE SPREAD OF LIBERTARIAN LEARNING

I therefore implore all libertarian readers (who are, after all, more literate than your average lefty) to look long and hard at your book collections and ask yourselves where they would be of most benefit. At home, where they are of no use to anyone but yourself? Or in libraries, where the general public (including yourself) can have access to them? I concede that initially it was heart wrenching to see my own collection of libertarian literature depleted in this way, but this was more than made up for by the knowledge that others besides myself could now make use of these works of wisdom. Admittedly, it's hardly the stuff that starts revolutions, but I like to think that in some small and imperceptible way I am contributing to the spread of libertarian learning in this country. Can you say the same?