



THE SPIRIT OF INDEPENDENCE: THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF FREEDOM

Lee Harris

Intellectuals routinely give undue weight to people's ideas. They tend to believe that ideas cause attitudes, though it is far more often the other way around. Consider the natural libertarians.

Several years ago, while attending a street festival in the small town of Tucker, Georgia, I came across a booth sponsored by the local libertarian society. At the time, I did not realize that my encounter would generate my next book. I only remember being struck by the question asked of everyone who visited the booth that day: "So who owns you?"

Like any good carnival barker, the young libertarian who asked this knew from experience that it was an effective opener. It catches you off-guard. It forces you to stop and think. The correct answer, as I soon discovered, was that we own ourselves. We are not owned by the state, the church, or even by God. We are our own property, to dispose of as we wish, in any way we want. We can throw ourselves off a cliff. We can move to Nepal. We can stand at street corners and beg. It is all up to us, because we all own ourselves.

The “correct” answer did not sit well with me. I told the young libertarian that, as a human being, I was not the kind of thing that anyone could own, including myself. Tables and chairs could be owned. Chevrolets and BMWs could be owned. But not human beings. After all, if I owned myself, then I had the right to sell myself, the right to deprive myself of my rights. But if liberty was my inalienable right, as the great libertarian Thomas Jefferson had asserted in the Declaration of Independence, then how could I alienate it by selling myself into slavery?

Perhaps my objection was overly subtle, because I noticed that my reservations did not bother anyone else who wandered into the libertarian booth that day. To most of them, the question “So who owns you?” seemed to come with the force of a revelation, and they responded with a decided and often emphatic, “Nobody owns *me*.” Which is to say, someone may own other people, but certainly does not own me.

In retrospect, their answers were more profound than mine. My answer came from the head; theirs from the heart. Many of those who responded from the heart probably knew very little about the philosophy behind libertarianism. Perhaps some had read John Locke or John Stuart Mill back in college, but most of them might best be considered *natural libertarians*. They knew they couldn’t stand the idea of someone else owning them, someone else telling them what to do or how to think, of someone else bossing them around. They all felt competent to manage their own lives and deeply resented any attempt by other people, including the government, to manage their lives for them. Rightly or wrongly, natural libertarians are firmly convinced that no one else can know their best interests more than they do. They insist on remaining in charge of their own destinies and bristle whenever other people seem intent on taking charge of their lives. Because natural libertarians respect their own independence, they respect the independence of others. They do not aspire to control other people’s lives, but when other people aspire to control theirs, they will resist tooth and nail. The natural libertarian will behave this way not because of an ideology, but because of his or her distinctive *attitude* towards life.

The High Cost of Not Rebelling

Intellectuals routinely give undue weight to people’s ideas. They tend to believe that ideas cause attitudes, though it is far more often the other way around. The discipline known as social

psychology recognizes attitude's primacy. Furthermore, as its name implies, social psychology focuses on attitudes that groups of individuals share: the group can be small, like an office, or quite large, like an entire culture. The work of two American social psychologists, Julian Rotter and Martin Seligman, offers perhaps the best introduction to unraveling the social psychology of the natural libertarian.

In 1966, American psychologist Julian Rotter published a paper that introduced the concept known as *locus of control*. Human beings, according to Rotter, could be divided into two basic groups: those who believed their locus of control was within themselves, and those who see themselves as under the control of forces located outside themselves, such as luck, or fate, or other people whose will cannot be resisted. The first group, called internals, believe that they are the masters of their own destiny; they tend to be high-achievers, optimistic about their ability to improve their lot, and to discard bad habits. They believe in willpower and positive thinking. They are determined to control their own lives, for better or worse. Members of the second group are called externals. They look on themselves as victims of circumstances, the playthings of fate. If they go to bed drunk, light up a cigarette, and burn their house down, they explain the disaster as another instance of their bad luck, and not their poor judgment, much less their bad habits. On the other hand, if a drunk driver hits an internal, the internal will scold himself that he should have been more alert at the wheel, he should have seen the drunk coming and swerved in time to avoid him.

Rotter discovered that certain groups tended to be dense with internals, while others tend to display the social psychology of the external. Jews, for example, tend to be internals. Rotter himself came from a family of Jewish immigrants, and was a classic high-achiever who believed that by hard work and study he could improve his lot and rise in the world. He was a classic self-made man. But, then, Rotter's success story was certainly not unique among Jewish immigrants to America—or indeed, other immigrants to America. Immigrants, after all, demonstrates the belief that they are in charge of their own destiny by electing to leave their homeland, in search of a new home that will permit them to exercise greater control over their own life. On the other hand, experiments have shown that the Japanese are more external than Americans. These cultural differences suggest that locus of control may be passed on as part of a culture's tradition, both consciously and unconsciously.

In order to encourage a population rich in internals—i.e., natural libertarians—a society needs cultural traditions that emphasize the value of independence and ethical agency. It must teach the young that they are responsible for their own actions, and to never regard themselves as victims of circumstance. Anthropologists who have studied the huge variety of human cultures have encountered quite primitive societies, such as the Nuer of the Sudan, which raise children to be feisty and independent. They are taught from an early age to resist being bullied by others and to fight back at the first attempt at dominating them. But wherever it may be found, at the heart of the tradition of independence lives a set of imperatives. Be self-reliant. Don't take other people's word for something; think for yourself. Never become anyone's follower. Bow down before no one. Stand up for your rights. Don't let bullies intimidate you. Don't permit yourself to become the slave of an addiction and thereby forfeit your all-important self-control. And do whatever you can to make sure that other members of your community uphold and cherish the same tradition of independence.

Of no less importance to the tradition of independence is the seemingly paranoid fear that power will fall into the wrong hands. The great nineteenth-century champion of liberty, Lord Acton, coined the famous maxim: "All power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." This obsessive fear of power is key to understanding why natural libertarians will automatically rebel when some overbearing elite threatens to rob them of their cherished tradition of independence. They rebel because they instinctively understand the high cost of not rebelling.

According to the American psychologist Martin Seligman, the cost of not rebelling is a pathological condition that he called "learned helplessness." Seligman developed this concept after performing a set of experiments in which he exposed various lab animals, such as dogs, to painful stimuli. Some of the dogs could escape the pain by pressing against a button; other dogs, when they pressed their button, failed to receive any relief from the pain. The dogs with the opportunity of acting to control the painful stimuli suffered no adverse long-term effects. The dogs with no control over the painful stimuli simply gave up trying to control their situation, and afterward suffered from clinical depression. Worse, in other tests, those dogs that had learned that they were helpless in one environment behaved equally helpless in a second environment, even when the second environment was one in which they could have escaped the painful stimulus by jumping over a low barrier into safety. Convinced that nothing they did could change their

wretched situation, the dogs simply lay down and cried. They had learned to be helpless.

Trained Helplessness

But Seligman's conclusion can be put in another way: the dogs had been *trained* to be helpless. The tradition of independence trains us to struggle against adversity, in the belief that we are ultimately in charge of our own destinies. But a multitude of traditions instill the opposite lesson. These traditions invariably preach the same message: You must submit to the inevitable. You are the victim of fate, so that any resistance is pointless and frequently counterproductive. It is folly to rebel against those with power, since they will inevitably use their superior power to crush you beneath their heels. Resign yourself to what lowly lot has been assigned you. Accept your utter helplessness, for that is the way of wisdom.

Under systems of slavery and servitude, those intended to become human chattel will be raised by a tradition that will encourage learned helplessness. Their young will likely listen to stories like Aesop's fable of the oak and the reeds—it is better to submit to *force majeure* than to try to stand up defiantly against it. If you are a reed, bend and survive. If you are an oak, refuse to bow and be broken. Yet, miraculously, there have always been some shining examples of men and women who, despite their servile status, have broken free of mental servitude.

In nineteenth-century America, Frederick Douglass escaped from slavery, and was determined to not only to remain free from chains, but to achieve the genuine independence that can only come from self-reliance and self-mastery. He succeeded, and instead of moaning that he was the victim of an unjust social system, Douglass set out, with immense courage and strength of will, to topple the unjust system under which he had suffered but never surrendered. Similarly, Seligman in his experiment on lab dogs found that not all the dogs reacted to the uncontrollable pain stimulus by learning to be helpless. Roughly one-third of the dogs did not respond this way, and kept attempting to escape the pain by whatever means they could. They continued to rebel against their harsh condition, despite the fact that they could not change it. To an outside observer, their rebellion might seem utterly pointless, yet it kept the irrationally rebellious dogs from a fate much worse than mere physical pain—namely, the fate of the majority of dogs who simply gave up, thereby resigning themselves forever to the misery of their hopeless situation.

Insidious Benevolence

The condition of learned helplessness can be induced by pain, but many kinder, gentler ways can achieve the same insidious results. When today's natural libertarians express their alarm at the inroads of "the nanny state," they are recognizing this fact. A good nanny's duty is to protect from harm the children she watches. But it is all too easy for the nanny, despite her best intentions, to overprotect her wards. If they act independently of her wishes, they might hurt themselves. To prevent this, a nanny might require her wards to ask permission before they do anything. Her message is: "Come to nanny first. Let her decide what is best for you." If the kids obey, they will imperceptibly become dependent on nanny to make decisions for them—indeed, they may become alarmed at the very idea of having to make decisions for themselves. By this point, the children have entered a state of learned helplessness, but one brought about by the most benevolent intentions.

In this example, we are assuming that the nanny means well, and that she is not deliberately aiming to crush her ward's independence. But some with a taste for power recognize there exists no better way of acquiring it than by making other people codependent on them. The nineteenth-century German politician Otto von Bismarck was hardly anyone's idea of a nanny, but he constructed the world's first nanny state for the sole purpose of making German citizens so codependent on the German Reich that they would never think of rebelling against it. By offering Germans a prototype of the modern welfare state, Bismarck's goal was not improving the common man's lot—it was his way of inducing the common man, when faced with personal difficulties, to expect the state to look after him, instead of relying on himself to deal with his own problems.

Ironically, Bismarck launched the first welfare state because he feared the influence of Karl Marx on the German working class. Marx opposed the welfare state precisely because he recognized that it would create a population codependent on the ruling elite in charge of the German Reich. It would tend to make them more docile and helpless, less self-reliant and rebellious. Today's European socialists, along with America's welfare statisticians, are not the descendants of Marx; they are the great-grandchildren of Bismarck.

A Kinder, Gentler Serfdom

Yet there is something even worse than creating codependency on either nanny or the welfare state. This occurs whenever a deliberate campaign encourages people to think of themselves as victims. Victims are not in charge of their own lives and destinies. They show the same attitude toward the world that Rotter's externals display. Our condition is not our fault, and we can do nothing about it ourselves. We must depend on others, since we obviously cannot depend on ourselves. We are helpless to help ourselves; therefore, others must help us.

Today in the United States, far too many in the political class willingly help the victims of social injustice, but only so long as they agree to play the victim role and to keep playing it so long as politicians need their votes. It is terrible to have been a victim of social injustice, but to condemn victims to remain perpetual victims simply to keep them voting a party line is the most heartless kind of political opportunism of all.

Yet this same opportunism has guided the leadership of the various liberation movements that emerged during the '60s. In order to keep their positions of influence and command, this leadership has done everything in its power to make their followers think of themselves as victims, and indeed to find new and unexpected modes of victimization. This is not liberation; it is training people into the attitude of Rotter's externals, who do not see themselves as masters of their own destinies, but as the tragic victims of circumstances beyond their control.

In the radio interviews I did after the publication of my new book, its alarming title, *The Next American Civil War*, received much attention. Some interviewers thought it was simply wacko. Others were more sympathetic, but argued that I really meant a war of ideas. But this is not what I really meant. I was referring to the clash between two radically incompatible attitudes towards life—a far more serious clash than mere intellectual debate. Ideas can be changed much more easily than our fundamental attitude. In fact, few things are more difficult to change.

On one side of the clash are the people like those who visited the libertarian booth in Tucker, Georgia, and whose attitude was: "Hell, no, nobody owns me." Perhaps some of these people have joined the Tea Party movement, but I suspect most have not. Yet they still remain natural libertarians, who instinctively place their

locus of control within themselves. Like Rotter's internals, they resist any effort by others to manage and control their lives.

On the other side of the clash are those who stand to benefit from encouraging others to rely on them instead of relying on themselves. Those who seek to exercise power and influence over others will naturally be hostile to the independent attitude of the natural libertarian, simply because this attitude is ultimately the one thing that stands in the way of achieving their own ambitions to rule, manage, and govern others. Today, far too many people in governmental circles, in our universities, and among the custodians of mass culture all share the goal of encouraging ordinary men and women to stop being self-reliant, cease to think for themselves, embrace their status as victims of circumstances, and to blame others for their own misfortunes instead of rousing themselves to overcome difficulties, as Frederick Douglass did.

The stakes in this clash are enormous. Natural libertarians find themselves in a desperate struggle to keep alive the traditions of independence that have shaped and molded their attitudes. They see themselves battling forces that seek to create a state of helpless codependency among their fellow citizens. Often, like the natural libertarians of the past—for example, our own revolutionary ancestors and the seventeenth-century English parliamentarians who resisted Charles the First—today's natural libertarians display a paranoid tendency to imagine that wicked men are conspiring to rob them of their liberty. Now, as in the past, the rhetoric of the natural libertarian will sound overwrought. But this must not confuse us. For the natural libertarian is always correct in his or her assumption that those with a hunger for power and influence will seek to crush, for their own interest, the spirit of rebellious independence that is the fundamental habit of the heart shared by all natural libertarians of every epoch and culture. Even under the worst of circumstances, when it would be easy to accept victim status, natural libertarians continue to struggle heroically against impossible odds, just as a third of the dogs in Seligman's experiments continued to try to escape their inescapable bondage. Was this folly or the noblest form of heroism, namely heroism for a cause you know is already lost?

The Roadblock to Serfdom

If the cause of the natural libertarian is lost, then the cause of liberty is also lost. Those with power prefer their subjects to behave like the majority of dogs in Seligman's experiment—to lie down and give up, to hand over the control of their fate to those

who possess the power. In the aftermath of World War II, when Joseph Stalin needed money to spend on armaments and pursuing nuclear weaponry, he knew exactly whom to tax: the Russian peasants. True, they were already on the verge of starvation, but Stalin knew that the peasants had been so beat down over centuries that they had completely lost the will to resist even the most outrageous demands upon their slender means. They paid and did not even moan—at least, not very loudly.


The road from serfdom is far less frequently traveled than the road to serfdom. Forget the ideology by which human beings have been reduced to serfs through the ages, including our own. The ideology only creates a pretext for acquiring and retaining power. It attempts to legitimate the monopoly of power that is the ultimate objective of every ruling class throughout history. The powers that be always seek to convince, first themselves and then others, that they are the powers that should be. Their rule is providential, right, and necessary. They want to make the serfs think to themselves: *How lucky we are to be the serfs of such excellent masters!*

Today's natural libertarians are the greatest roadblock on the road back to serfdom—a kinder and gentler serfdom, it is true, just as there are kinder, gentler ways of inducing a state of learned helplessness than the methods Seligman employed. The techniques by which human beings are induced into a sense of dependent helplessness may vary considerably, from the most coarse and brutal to the most ingeniously seductive, sophisticated, and subliminal. But they all equally accomplish their intended goal: to crush out, once and for all, the spirit of independence natural libertarians champion. As Seligman's experiment demonstrates, once you induce a state of learned helplessness, it does not seem possible to unlearn it. The dogs who have given up in the initial experiment, from which they could not escape, immediately gave up in the second experiment, from which they could easily have escaped. The spark of independence had been extinguished in them forever, as it had been extinguished in the Russian peasants whom Stalin bled dry. They became the passive victims of a cruel and uncaring universe.

The ease in which so much of humanity has been reduced to serfdom is at the root of the natural libertarian's zealous passion to preserve his or her own independence. Because they have the attitude of Rotter's internals, they fear those externals who willingly hand over control of their own lives to other people. A society composed mainly of externals will too quickly relinquish their claim to decide their own affairs, thereby permitting the

power-hungry to boss and bully them at will. Under such circumstances, internals will inevitably find themselves fighting a losing battle, although they may still refuse to lie down and die. This explains why internals must always stay on their guard. It explains why they abhor any ideology that seeks to convince people they are helpless victims of fate. It explains why they resist, at its first appearance, any effort to seize control not only over their own lives, but over the lives of the other members of his community. It explains why they insist on keeping alive and passing down from generation to generation the maxims at the heart of the spirit of independence, teaching their children to take responsibility for their own actions and to accept blame for misbehavior. Lastly, it explains why they will stick to those religious and cultural traditions that have cultivated their own exceptional attitude. The remarkable survival and success of the Jewish people, and of the Hebrew religion, must surely relate to the fact that their ancestors instilled the same message in generation and generation: Thou shalt keep alive the attitude of the internal. Never let others manage your affairs, and when they try to interfere, resist and rebel against them.

We are in the midst not of a war of ideas, or even a cultural war, taken in its usual superficial sense. We are fighting an old battle all over again. On the one side stand the natural libertarians, Rotter's internals, furiously insistent on defending their integrity as ethical agents. On the other side stand those in power who naturally find such people troublesome nuisances, and who would prefer to rule a society made up of individuals who have been properly educated to know they were really incompetent to manage their own affairs, and to regard themselves as the victims of circumstances.

To natural libertarians, there can be no more existential conflict than the one they face today. Are they destined to perish from the earth along with their cherished cultural and religious traditions, pushed aside by those who claim to champion progress but who in fact promote learned helplessness in the general population, however benevolent their intentions? Will the natural libertarians' roadblock to serfdom simply be brushed aside without a fight? Or will these roadblocks turn into barricades, to be manned by those who are willing to make the last sacrifice to preserve their spirit of independence? These questions only time can answer. 

From *A Magazine of Ideas*, American.com. Lee Harris is the author of *The Next American Civil War*, as well as *Civilization and Its Enemies* and *The Suicide of Reason*.

WELCOME NEW MEMBER

Jay Williams

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzigan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.