What is Classical Liberal History?

Introduction

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This book is designed to generate new ideas and new ways of thinking by reviving a neglected historical tradition, classical liberal history. In doing so, we hope not only to call attention to the best elements of the classical liberal tradition but also to call upon historians to reflect on the importance of this tradition to the history and practice of their own discipline.

Modern historiography reflects a diverse and overlapping set of epistemological positions, methods of inquiry, and approaches to research. In American academia, historiography began in a conservative vein. Conservative historians tend to write histories of nations and biographies of statesmen and great figures who serve as moral models for preserving the best of society. Conservatives see in the past a morality tale and lament the destruction of ordered systems which they hope to resurrect at least in part. By the turn of the 20th century, however, progressive history had come to dominate the preparation and practice of American historians. This approach to historical study arose toward the end of the 19th century, alongside the development of the new "social" sciences. Progressive historians, like their counterparts in sociology, political science, and economics, tended to see the role of their professions as helping to direct society on a path toward a better future. Such presentist and political purposes have also characterized the alternative Marxist and other collectivist models of history (e.g., feminist histories) which are based on the propositions that all people belong to a class, that their actions are shaped by their material circumstances, and that therefore we must study people as groups to understand how the past is necessarily moving us through different stages of development. More recently, postmodernist historians have challenged the possibility that historians can arrive at "objective" facts with the implication that history is itself a political act written only to serve power.

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This volume seeks to offer an alternative approach by illuminating what may be called "classical liberal" history. Like progressive, Marxist, feminist, postmodernist, or conservative historians, historians self-consciously working in the classical liberal tradition seek evidence from the past to explain how the world is structured. Unlike these other approaches to historical research, however, classical liberal historiography is based upon the principle of methodological individualism central to the classical liberal tradition. While classical liberal historians do not reject out of hand the study of nations, political parties, social or minority groups, they recognize that these collectives do not act on their own, but consist rather of the ideas and actions of their individual members. Classical liberal history is the study of individual action in the past. Guided by a general set of assumptions about human nature (i.e., that humans seek to better their circumstances, that they act on their subjective desires to satisfy ends, that they inhabit a world of trade-offs and scarcity) classical liberal historians see acting individuals as the basic units of historical investigation.[1] Classical liberal history begins with the recognition of the inherent worth of the individual and presents individuals as the starting point for historical inquiry and concern. Moreover, because in the classical liberal tradition human action is conceived of as voluntary action, classical liberal historians are especially attuned to examining the economic, social, political, and cultural conditions, and institutions that preserve the widest sphere for human liberty.

Classical liberals have no monopoly on the study of liberty nor its definition, but they do give exceptional weight to liberty as a concern of their analysis and they do define liberty in ways that differ from the conservative or progressive conceptions of the term. In short, classical liberals value negative liberty over positive liberty. Negative liberty is best defined as "freedom from external impediments deliberately imposed."[2] Positive liberty, on the other hand, is not a "freedom from" but a "freedom to," as when one is enabled to make certain actions. Classical liberals tend to be skeptical of positive liberties, especially when they are imposed by government. The boundaries between these and other conceptions of liberty, however, are not always clear, and in fact may overlap in certain ways. Following Jacob Levy, we might break down classical liberal concerns of liberty into two categories: (1) ideas about the threat of tyranny through central planning and bureaucracy, and (2) worries about threats to liberty from "customary, local, religious, traditional, and decentralized authority," or what Levy calls a pluralist liberalism and a rationalist liberalism. These two threats to liberty identified by classical liberals seem to press back against progressivism's impositions on the one hand, and the lingering injustices of conservative orders on the other hand. Classical liberal history is a record of the attempts to define and encourage individual's freedom from these outside threats,

and to understand the economic, political, social, and cultural limitations to complete, unlimited freedom.

Any conceptual category begs for a definition, and "history" is no exception. How we define history determines how we write it, and what purpose it has. Obviously, historians make choices of what we write about and how we write about it. Classical liberal historians believe that history is a rational inquiry into the past and an attempt to reconstruct and try to understand human decision-making through the trail of evidence that the past has left us. And yet classical liberal historians tend to acknowledge that interpretation of this evidence is not an exact science, and that it is not the goal of historical study to discover universal laws of human behavior not to defend the assumed inevitability of progress toward greater liberty . Classical liberal historians believe that we should choose to write about salient, relevant issues of human freedom and unfreedom such as the rise and fall of slavery, the origins of constitutional limits on government power, and the growth of markets that bring prosperity. What we write about matters.

Moreover, how we write history matters. History is not an exercise in literary fiction; it requires correspondence to things that really happened in the past. At the same time, only a naïve mind would call for a "neutral" or "objective" historical account uninfluenced by the subjective concerns and perceptions of the historian. Nevertheless, because evidence of the past cannot interpret itself, and because the aim of historical writing is to expand our stock of knowledge about the past, good historians believe that we must aim to get our facts straight and our narratives to cohere, while always standing open to reconsider our views of the past. By recognizing that history presents claims that should be subject to empirical falsification, we retain a means to constantly check and test their accuracy.

Classical liberal history is thus both a methodological and ethical approach to doing history that has been shaped by the classical liberal orientation itself. It operates, first of all, within a tradition of the scholarly ethic that historians owe their subjects. We must study the past with a sense of philanthropy, that is, with attention and love for what it means to be human. This ethical orientation compels us to treat evidence on its own terms, not our own. This orients us fundamentally to an anthropological understanding of human persons possessed of dignity, reason, passion, interests, and an inalienable moral responsibility that can be fulfilled only to the extent that we are free. One consequence of such an outlook is that we treat our subjects through a principle of charity, seeking to understand rather than to judge. When historians poorly handle evidence, willfully misinterpret it, or allow presentist judgments to shape too much of their interpretations of the evidence, they diminish the public trust in their discipline. This is why classical liberal historians reaffirm these liberal scholarly principles of openness, debate, empiricism, and charity.

The principles of liberal openness and debate are essential for all historical discourse. This is why a central tenet of classical liberal history is dissatisfaction with narratives that claim certainty or completeness, or which shut off all attempts to present alternative perspectives. Classical liberal historians are skeptical of grand claims, and skeptical above all of prediction, which falls outside of the realm and purpose of proper history. The complexity and great unknowns of history teach us to be humble in what we claim for truth and foster a scholarly approach rooted in epistemic humility. While others might look to the past for knowledge to implement in policy or justify political action, classical liberals are more likely to use the past to show how policies intended to do good might fail—not predicting that they *will* fail, but being open to the ways policies may or *may not* "do good." On the topic of prediction, the liberal view opposes the teleology of Christian or Marxist history, or even certain Whig antecedents of our own intellectual traditions. Most classical liberals believe that history is not a great march, that there is no discernable grand theory, and that we should beware those who claim that there is. It might be best, they think, if we follow J. G. A. Pocock or Reinhardt Kosseleck and think of histories in the plural, or, if we follow John Lukacs, and think of history as an engagement between a participant and the empirical evidence.

What we are framing as classical liberal history is a broad tradition, with strong philosophical roots and active present-day practitioners. One might include in this later list such scholars as the economic historians Deirdre McCloskey, Niall Ferguson, Raymond de Roover, and Robert Higgs; the historians of Europe: Alan Charles Kors, Richard Pipes, and Ralph Raico; American historians: Larry Schweikart, Kevin Gutzman, Allan Kulikoff, Jeffrey Hummel; legal historians: Stephen Halbrook, Randy Barnett, David Bernstein, and Philip Hamburger. This list includes many people who diverge in opinion on a number of issues, and many who would not self-consciously call themselves classical liberals or classical liberal historians. The editors and many of the contributors to this volume believe that the increasing domination of collectivist ideals in the scholarly training and practices of academic historians makes the present an auspicious time to delineate more explicitly what can be construed classical liberal history.

Many historians, regardless of their politics, are working partly in the classical liberal tradition, even if they don't recognize it. This is because liberalism and the historical profession grew up side-by-side in the 19th century, so many of their methods and goals overlap and complement each other. The liberal view of history first emerged in the 18th century, when liberals sought protection from monarchy and tyranny by developing constitutional opposition to autocratic rule. Classical liberal history came into force in the 19th century, and it developed in tandem with nationalist projects in Europe.

Writers like Droysen in Germany, Croce in Italy, Fredericq and Pirenne in Belgium, and Hume in England, all focused on liberty in their nations. These early generations of liberal historians, ever concerned with political theory, told stories of how liberty had emerged and how it could be protected. They praised heroes of liberty, condemned acts of predation upon it, and they inspired progress toward the development of free societies. As histories of national freedom became a common genre, scientific standards demanded fair readings of the sources. In Germany, where the historical profession was most developed, the classical liberal view of history was often paired with rigorous archival work and the historicist emphasis on the uniqueness and unrepeatability of historical events.

We believe that historians across the profession can benefit from better understanding both the history of the classical liberal tradition and the approach to historical study that has emerged out of that tradition. The conservative tradition of historical thought, for example, can appreciate methodological individualism and the classical liberal opposition to central planning. It can learn to better apply principles of neoclassical economics and appreciate the importance of subjectivity and subject value in history. Eschewing discussions of philosophy of history, conservatives often write about what history is *for*, but not what history *is*. According to conservatives such as Russel Kirk, Edmund Burke, Eric Voegelin, and Christopher Dawson, the past is a source of wisdom and moral understanding. In this view, history is useful for structuring society along certain moral and political ends. A chief goal of conservative historians is to recognize order and purpose, both human and divine. It should not come as a surprise then that many major conservative historians (we might add to the list above Owen Barfield and Harry Jaffa) were primrarily political philosophers, not trained historians. There are also conservative historians like R.G. Collingwood and Herbert Butterfield, who were concerned more with historical methods than politics. While the modern conservative approach to history is nowhere well-defined and systematized, it seems to have a few essential elements: (1) influence of the Christian view of the world and a general acceptance of teleology, (2) preference for ideas over materialist explanations of history, (3) a belief that history teaches us about wisdom and even divine wisdom, and (4) that ordered society is preferable to disordered society. The second point most strongly overlaps with the classical liberal approach. Less important in conservative history, but still sometimes visible are the classical liberal themes of freedom, checks on political power, and tolerance.

Progressive historians could also benefit from an introduction to classical liberal history because they share many of the same values (tolerance, rights, free speech, etc.) and scientific assumptions. Progressive historians seek to study conflicts in the past, particularly to highlight the failures of the market

economy and successes of government regulation. Like conservatives, progressives look to the past to find examples of order, not the organic order of tradition, but the imposed order of the cognitive elite. For progressives, written history serves to justify particular actions. Progressive history from Charles Beard and Vernon Parrington on the American side, to Geoffrey Barraclough in England all tend toward history that is useful for present politics. It is possible to agree with a philosopher like the conservative R.G. Collingwood, and admit that all history is present thought, or with Barraclough, that all history must have contemporary relevance, and still not be a progressive. But some progressives have been all too willing to use history to serve present ideological ends.

Even when broadly historicist, progressives have retained a belief in teleology. Serving this narrative of progress all too often becomes the aim, rather than the end of progressive history. Classical liberals are not immune from falling into the same trap, but because they have less faith in the application of top-down solutions, they are less confident in the ability of the history to apply past knowledge to directly solve present-day social problems. From the writings of F.A. Hayek, they have learned to recognize that any individual can only possess a small fragment of available and relevant knowledge, and that it is the conceit of the planners to think that they can implement singular top-down solutions. Rather, classical liberals believe that history teaches humility and does not readily give us answers about how we should behave. While classical liberals study and praise great historical processes that bought human flourishing, and conservatives study and praise great statesman and national power, progressives prefer to highlight the errors and evils of Western civilization.

Classical liberal and progressive historians can also often be distinguished by whether they treat historical change as contingent or as part of a necessary process. The former, for example, tend to write of improvement, while progressives speak, of course, of progress. The difference is subtle but significant. Improvement is the measureable distance between the present and the past. Progress, however, is the general direction of development toward some usually generally conceived but often ill-defined goal.

Classical liberal historians have an affinity for borrowing theory from other disciplines, particularly economics and political science. From economics, they have adopted a recognition of spontaneous orders (the patterns resulting from human action, but not human design), and an awareness of unintended consequences. They have concluded that a necessary prerequisite for prosperity is the freedom of individuals to maximize their own advantage through barter and trade. They have also imported from the toolbox of the economist such ideas as subjective value theory, marginalism, opportunity costs, and the ever-present reality of the scarcity of goods. Any historical explanation must

obey the rules of economics. Aiming at the improvement of society, instead of just its preservation (conservative) or its destruction (Marxist), classical liberals have had an inherent interest in political theory (such as in forms of federalism, or public choice voting analysis), even as they express skepticism of the claims of politicians.

A large part of classical liberal history written today confronts and challenges reigning interpretations of history that disparage individual freedom or fail to tell an accurate or coherent story. Others can be defined as classical liberals because they have chosen to write about liberty itself, including studies of freedom across the world, in particular nations, or even in political movements. Classical liberal history writing also seeks to expand the possible array of historical interpretations of a given event or historical process, so that those traditionally opposed to individual freedom might reconsider their views. Across the board, these historians write to celebrate positive cultural developments, the growth of prosperity, and individual successes. But, they also criticize the growing power of the State and the trend toward group identity politics at the expense of individual freedom.

Histories of liberty promise to re-direct the historical discourse into themes that a classical liberal historian finds more appropriate and rewarding. The history of liberty may be broad such as David Schmidtz and Jason Brennan's *The History of Liberty*, or it may focus on important figures such James Otteson's works on Adam Smith, or it may chart the political course of liberal ideas like Arthur J. Ekirch's *The Decline of American Liberalism*, or Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition*. A subset of this type of history is the history of libertarianism like Brian Doherty's *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement* (2007). The study of liberty is also an implicit theme in most works of slavery, abolitionism, emancipation, immigration, civil rights, and technological progress.[3]

Works of this type may be written (and often are written) by people unfriendly to liberty (particularly negative liberty—"freedom from coercion"). In fact, many works on, for example, the role of capitalism during the industrial revolution, are concerned with liberty, even if their greater concern is equality or order, or something else entirely. Since classical liberal historians view the study of liberty as the most important and relevant concern of history, they tend to welcome books such as David Hacket Fisher's *Liberty and Freedom*, Joyce Appleby's *History of Capitalism*, and Eric Foner's *History of American Freedom*, even if these authors are sometimes opposed to liberal values. At least they are talking about topics of common interest and importance. As these examples illustrate, those studying the history of classical liberalism do not always embrace the term "classical liberal historian." Indeed, the history of classical liberalism can and should be written by historians of all ideological persuasions.

A third type of classical liberal history writing is open, meaning that it doesn't directly argue for a particular interpretation of an event, but rather presents multiple interpretations, sometimes through primary sources, allowing the audience to wrestle with ideas about or perhaps come to their own conclusions. The process of encouraging open debate on multiple views of history is itself affirming of classical liberal openness to ideas. In the classroom, multiple views can be presented on spectrum or a matrix to encourage debate and further understanding. Unlike confrontational classical liberal history, this type of open inquiry allows the audience to discover an interpretation of the past through engagement with curated materials. It does not preach to the crowd like the confrontational works, but may win new recruits or get fence-sitters to commit to a new view. Regardless, by opening up debate, the open method naturally challenges reigning interpretations, promotes the liberty of free-flowing discussion and debate, and encourages people to arrive at more considered, thought-out conclusions.

Finally, classical liberal history is not "neoliberal" history. Neoliberalism has been an ill-defined, amorphous term used to deride a range of ideological opponents. Those who call themselves classical liberals today stress their connection with their liberal heritage on both the right and left of the political spectrum. In this sense, it is also much broader than simply libertarianism, which is largely a late 20th-century invention. Neoliberalism is usually conceived of as a right-wing ideology, attached—often haphazardly—to an array of figures and concepts including Milton Friedman, the Chicago School of Economics, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, Augusto Pinochet, and even Donald Trump. It is also applied to capitalism in general, and state capitalism in particular, or is essentially synonymous with globalization. The term's use in a growing but often disjointed academic literature is almost exclusively pejorative, with few if any serious claimants using the term or its purported characteristics to identify themselves.[4] Far from advancing scholarly understanding, this approach serves little more than to poison the well of inquiry—to define one's opponents with a priori assumptions of evil motivations, secret affinities for dictators, and quasi-conspiratorial designs for the world. The resulting literature on neoliberalism, itself often highly polemic and sure of its own position and yet simultaneously starved of evidentiary rigor, becomes little more than a destructive bludgeon to shut down further inquiry.

This present collection is about what classical liberal history is, and what it is not; this book is also an attempt to describe what classical liberal history writing should be going forward.

While many of the contributors to the book identify as classical liberals, some do not, and some even reject the usefulness of the term. Regardless of how we define ourselves, we are fundamentally interested in exploring those

aspects of the past that illustrate the vital importance of human thought, decision, and freedom to explain the unfolding of events. We are committed to the proposition that moral and intellectual decisions are at the very center of any story worthy of the name history, for without choice there is no story to tell. It is in this sense then we may be seen as belonging broadly to that tradition of scholarship that is classically liberal. But in a still wider sense we believe that neglect of this important aspect of the human condition, of Liberty in thought and deed, has eroded the standards of evidence necessary to sustain historical inquiry. Voluntary associationalism, fallibilism and humility, we suggest, are at the root of the historical enterprise and must not be abandoned. We offer these essays then as a way of reopening a critically important discussion of the nature of the human being and the kinds of analysis and evidence required to interpret his/her past.

CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS

Each of the contributors to this book were asked to summarize the historiography of a sub-field or theme of historical research. They were asked to then explain the contribution of classical liberals to this historiography and explain what historians in the field should focus on next.

The book opens, ironically, with a chapter that challenges the coherence of the concept of classical liberalism in American history. The author, Scott Shubitz (Gordon State University), argues that classical liberalism is a concept formed by Progressives and Conservatives in the early 20th century in an attempt to project onto the past a narrative to justify their own political agendas. The dominant narrative of a free-market classical liberalism, Shubitz finds, is more imagined than real. Shubitz warns of the all-too-real chance that we can define the past from a platform that is too firmly situated in the present. Nineteenth-century liberals were a different lot than what we might imagine. Shubitz' presentation raises questions that we expect will not only continue to be contested among historians of classical liberalism, but that will challenge us to continue to refine the potential meanings of classical liberal history.

Chapters follow in a roughly chronological order, even if these contributions tend to be more thematic than chronologically focused. Lenore T. Ealy (President, The Philanthropic Enterprise) offers a reflection on some of the epistemological and methodological problems that arose with the development of classical liberal thought. These problems can be seen in the successive methodological battles in which classical liberals have found it necessary to engage both in justifying their approach to creating a science of human action and in their working out of the historical, moral, and political

implications of this science. Ealy suggests that as classical liberal thought has developed into a distinct intellectual tradition that now seeks to narrate its own theory and history, its adherents have largely ignored addressing what may be the central historical puzzle that classical liberalism is challenged to solve. In failing more intentionally to address Alexis de Tocqueville's call for a new science of association as an indispensable guide to human action in the democratic age, classical liberal scholars have as yet missed the opportunity to formulate a paradigm of social and political thought capable of garnering epistemic authority that might help democratic societies become less vulnerable to the paradoxical situation through which excessive individualism generated by equality of conditions produces despotic government.

Phillip Magness (Berry College) takes on the New History of Capitalism school for its intellectual inconsistencies and pejorative approach to its subject, and suggests ways in which classical liberals are better armed to engage this subject on a definitional and methodological basis. Much of this new wave of literature is prescriptive, rather than descriptive. Its rejection of much of the toolbox of the economics profession, ignorance of earlier cliometric approaches, and inability to define capitalism leaves practitioners of the New History of Capitalism ill-equipped to do more than insert political presumptions in place of researched conclusions.

Anthony Gregory (PhD candidate, University of California-Berkeley) offers a provocative assessment of how classical liberals have approached the topic of civil liberties in historical research. His chapter offers, at once, a measured criticism of the mythologies that civil liberties conceptually infuse into classical liberal treatments of the past as well as a challenge to take up the topic with greater nuance. He suggests a renewed attentiveness to the messiness of a common law tradition that classical liberals often accept as a timeless principle without due scrutiny, urging scholars instead to historicize our treatment of particular civil libertarian issues of the past and present. This path urges greater engagement with past conceptualizations of race, as well as subjects that distorted—and arguably continue to distort—the theoretical conceptualization of a robust system of civil liberties.

David Beito (University of Alabama) investigates the relationship of Progressivism and Classical Liberalism in the Progressive Era and the New Deal. This period has been essential ground for informing political views of history. In the period, a transition was underway as those who feared government power gave way to those who wished to use government power to re-shape society. Classical liberalism in the Progressive Era was unable to shed a host of associated beliefs like separation of church and state and universal natural rights that seemed old-fashioned in a new forward-looking and pragmatic century. The welfare state took over from mutual-help organization, and the support for big-government solutions became entrenched in the 1930s. Beito

offers the classical liberal counterfactuals, the roads not taken, which are often left out of historical accounts of the period. Historians must learn to adequately tell both sides of the controversies of the period.

Jonathan Bean (Southern Illinois University-Carbondale) argues that the historical study of civil rights deserves to incorporate the classical liberal emphasis on natural rights, individual freedom, colorblind law, constitutionalism, and market capitalism. Because the field of civil rights history is almost entirely dominated by the left, it forgets and neglects the greater classical liberal tradition that rights-language emerged from. The result is that historians over-emphasize the role that radical communists played in the civil rights movement, and "whiteness" interpretations are used to explain why workers did not organize along class lines. The forgotten aspects of civil rights history include the role of religion in attacking slavery and promoting anti-discrimination laws, the individualism that introduced right-to-work legislation, a legal structure that maintained that laws should apply equally, regardless of color, and, finally, the role of the market in undermining racism by punishing those who act on irrational prejudices. Even more importantly, classical liberals were actors, both individually and through voluntary associations that fought segregation and argued for liberal immigration policies.

Hans Eicholz (Liberty Fund) seeks to shed light on the course and development of modern social history, especially as it relates to questions of personal agency and context. All too often, modern social history has presented itself as the grand scientific alternative to intellectual and biographical narrative, and for a time, it did indeed appear that social historians would sweep the field to the exclusion of intellectual and political narratives. But, social history, as Eicholz explains, carried with it the seeds of its own destruction. When everything is socially constructed, thought and choice are dead, and to this day, the ghosts of materialism still haunt the theoretical understanding of social historians even as they now invoke phrases like discourse and meaning. This latter "linguistic turn" is however the product of a series of controversies that current social historians resolutely refuse to acknowledge: the Hobesbawm-Hartwell-Thompson debates concerning how to interpret the rise of wealth in the early Industrial Revolution in England. As Eicholz demonstrates, it was Hartwell's challenge to both that prompted the move to subjective assertions about the nature of class that have yet to be substantiated.

Sarah Skwire (Liberty Fund) adds a chapter on classical liberal feminist history. She argues that the race, class, gender paradigm does not have to be Marxist, deconstructionist, or postmodernist, but that it fits well into the empowering, liberating agenda of classical liberalism. The dominant line in feminist history sees the state as a necessary tool for the advancement of women's causes. Skwire reminds us that most of the social and economic gains women have made in the past few centuries have come from their own

initiatives that lie outside of the state, and often run against state power. She then gives helpful direction for those who wish to write feminist history from the classical liberal perspective. Areas of study such as peace studies, the history of taxation, and marriage law would be good places to start. A focus on "rights," an essentially liberal theme, is essential in the history of feminism.

Leonid Krasnozhon (Loyola University New Orleans) and Mykola Bunyk (Lviv Regional Institute of Public Administration) describe how classical liberals played a vibrant role in Russia and the Ukraine, despite the reigning Marxist orthodoxy in the 20th century. The authors focus on particular neglected liberals like Mykhaylo Drahomanov, a historian who rejected the materialist dialectic of history as too simple and crude, while looking to social change to explain historical developments. They also present a history of the Ukrainian Mykhaylo Tugan-Baranovsky, who was influenced by Carl Menger's theory of marginal subjective value in his search for a way to combine socialism and the market. Krasnozhon and Bunyk provide inspiration for liberals to look to unlikely places to find their history in action.

In the penultimate chapter, Matthew Brown (University of Illinois) uses insights from Adam Smith to show how liberals might explore the history of modern economic growth. Many histories of the origins of the modern economy rely on overly stylized episodes in the historical narrative that make the story easy to tell, but untrue to history. Focusing on major labeled events, for example, leads to outcomes being confused for causes. The study of causation and origins needs to be more focused on a process-oriented understanding of both economic and social changes. And major social and economic changes such as the rise of capitalism of the "great divergence" need to be explored with the tools of both economists and social historians, when in practice they are seldom combined.

Alberto Garin (Universidad Francisco Marroquin) closes with a warning about how attempts to create common history, history ostensibly belonging to us all, are logically impossible and necessarily exclusive. First of all, Garin challenges the view that the nation is the natural container of history. Common history is also put into service of regional minority groups and political parties to define themselves against others. Garin gives advice about how to avoid generalizations, anachronisms, anecdotes, hagiography, and elite paper sources. For Garin, liberal history is the same as good history. It is scientific not in the sense that it has a body of laws, but scientific in its dedication to standards of evidence and precision of explanation. Grand, general histories are histories written at low resolution to apply broadly. High resolution historical narratives bring out the uncomfortable nuances and encourage debate as much as inclusion. Honesty, not comfort, should be the goal of history. For freedom to persist, and for free inquiry to continue, we must be honest above all.

As these chapters demonstrate, the goal of classical liberal history is the study of those events and processes which can tell us something about human nature and the development of society, so that what we learn can better inform us about how we can maximize individual and collective freedom and prosperity. The contributions in this volume demonstrate some of the range of issues that interest classical liberal historians.

Classical liberal historians have defended market economies and the rights of free speech. They have warned against the failures of government intervention in the economy, highlighted individual successes, described the conditions that made the rise of private property and free exchange possible, analyzed the nature of political regimes and statecraft, recorded the historical atrocities of collectivist thinking, warned against corporate interference in the government, rejoiced in the liberation of people from slavery, serfdom, and oppression, and charted the importance of ethics in operating good business. Research on these themes is far from closed, and the arguments far from settled. There is much work left to be done. This research cannot be successful without considering liberty.

After all, what is history without liberty? For the Austrian economist, Ludwig von Mises, history literally was the story of liberty, and by definition it could be nothing else. That is to say, when we write history, we are charting free, individual choices made against the backdrop of the material world. While circumstances certainly influence action, only individuals can have the freedom to choose what action to take. In this light, culture is the free expression of free people, the sum patterns of how people have given meaning to their lives. Each moment, a moment of liberty, reveals real choices that matter. It is the task of any historian to understand that moment of freedom, that human choice. History teaches us to recognize freedom and unfreedom, to guard against tyranny and corruption. Historical narratives give us the justification of who we are and why we act in certain ways. Historical understanding is the bulwark against which evil and ignorant flail.

Now, classical liberal historians must do more than tell the story of liberty. They must also provide young scholars with the tools of analysis to become critical and creative historians. Skills such as foreign languages, the patience to interpret, the ability to make analytic connections, and above all, clear writing, are necessary. If this school of thought is to make a larger impact, it needs to build a network of classical liberal historians, with institutions and infrastructure for research and dissemination of ideas. If the historical profession is to remain relevant to the needs of individuals and societies, it must re-engage with the classical liberal tradition. It is this tradition, following in the footsteps of J. S. Mill, that recognizes open, vigorous debate as the very core of healthy historical interpretation.

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NOTES

1. Ludwig von Mises would add that history is literally the story of individual human actions, choices made within the confines of society and the environment. Ludwig von Mises, *Theory and History* (Yale University Press, 1957).

2. David Schmidtz and Jason Brennan, *The History of Liberty* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 17.

3. Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007). George H. Smith, *The System of Liberty: Themes in the History of Classical Liberalism* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013). David Schmidtz and Jason Brennan, *A Brief History of Liberty* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

4. Boas, Taylor C., and Jordan Gans-Morse. "Neoliberalism: From new liberal philosophy to anti-liberal slogan." *Studies in Comparative International Development* 44.2 (2009): 137–161.