

BOOK REVIEWS

Edited by N. Stephan Kinsella*

CHRIS SCIABARRA. *TOTAL FREEDOM: TOWARD A DIALECTICAL LIBERTARIANISM*. UNIVERSITY PARK: UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS, 2000. Pp. 496.

Sciabarra's book is both stimulating and frustrating. On the one hand, it seems to be about method; on the other, it seems to wish to apply the method Sciabarra recommends—dialectics—to assess the work of such libertarian thinkers as F.A. Hayek, Ayn Rand, and Murray Rothbard. There is much to learn here, and also much about which to be skeptical.

Sciabarra's project is certainly ambitious. He allows himself 187 pages in which to develop the idea of dialectics, which he provisionally defines as “the art of context-keeping” (p. 2). Chapters one and two, respectively centered on Aristotle and Hegel, treat the dialectical attempt to see the “whole as an organic unity, not a collection of disconnected constituent elements” (p. 38). Chapter three discusses Marx, Menger, Hayek, and Mises, all of whom get points for dialectical thought, even if Mises's “rationalism” comes in for some criticism. Rand's analysis of man and society on three levels comes in for discussion as well. Here the reader would do well to consult Sciabarra's earlier book, *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical*,¹ in which he developed a dialectical reading of Rand.

By chapter four, Sciabarra is ready to close in on a definition of dialectics. He does this by setting up contrasting approaches—strict

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¹Chris Sciabarra, *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

atomism, strict organicism, dualism (the author's least favorite), and monism—and dealing with their errors. Dialectics, properly understood, is said to avoid the perils of each.

Chapters five through eight, making up just over half of the book, apply Sciabarra's notions to a critique of libertarianism and, most importantly from our perspective, to a detailed exposition and critique of the systematic defense of liberty undertaken by Murray Rothbard. I have to say that the exposition of Rothbard's work is quite good, but the critique seems flawed.

Sciabarra's account reflects a thorough reading of Rothbard's work and shows a good grasp of Rothbard's ideas. As so often happens in this book, copious quotations are mustered around the topic, while the authorial voice slips into the background. Every serious criticism of Rothbard ever uttered is here, along with all the silly and tendentious ones.

Sciabarra's own view is that Rothbard's thought shows important dialectical elements, but that, in the end, Rothbard remained caught in a terrible "dualism"—separating out in analysis what cannot be sundered in reality—which led him to propose a "monistic" and "utopian" abolition of the state in favor of a purely market-based society.

Since this seems to be the most important conclusion to which dialectical reasoning has steered Sciabarra, it bears further discussion. First, as regards the dialectical approach generally, how does one determine that a dialectical approach will prove useful for any particular field of study? Might there not be disciplines—praxeology, for example—which can, in fact, proceed deductively from *a priori* axioms to valid conclusions without any assistance from dialectics, empiricism, or other such handmaidens?

Sciabarra is very concerned that social thinkers and would-be reformers keep track of "internal relations" which hold between the "parts" of systems and societies. Fine, we might say, but "internal to what?" Selection of the whole to be studied is a key question in any science or for any problem under consideration. Sciabarra remarks, here and there, that he might be taken to be exhorting us to keep track of context, and nothing more; put that way, who could disagree?

Let us say that we wish to study "society." What might that be? Is it the sum of all human beings and all their activities from Fairbanks down to Tierra del Fuego and back up to Uppsala by way of Cape

Town, Alice Springs, and Port Moresby, thence to Nairobi, Vladivostok, and back to Fairbanks? Is our subject mankind in its “species-being” with special emphasis on “labor”? I sometimes think that what little sense there is in Marxism can be gleaned by substituting “human action” every time Marx says “labor” (at least in his more philosophical writings). But why go to all that trouble when we already have a theory of human action?

If Mankind is not the whole to be studied, then we might study civilizations, along with Spengler, Toynbee, and Quigley, without arriving at quite the level of specificity we likely have in mind. In the end, we may find ourselves studying politically bounded societies juridically defined as nation-states. We find that people in such societies undertake political, intellectual, economic, and other activities. Is everything within those boundaries part of the “whole”? If so, how useful is the concept, and for what purposes?

Sciabarra believes that we cannot usefully separate market from state in the way Rothbard wanted, as analysis and program. To my mind, this is like saying we cannot separate fractional reserves, fraud, or robberies by Jesse and Frank James from the concept and/or reality of banking. It might be that to conflate state and market (and other things) as parts of “the whole” is to repeat the errors of *Enfantin* and *Bazard*, who did so in opposition to early political economy. One is reminded of E.P. Thompson’s critique of the structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser as amounting to a restatement of functionalism.

Sciabarra asks whether, in our own society, where state and market become ever-more intertwined, we can usefully say which outcomes (or parts of outcomes) are to be attributed to one or the other. Put that way, I am not certain that it matters. If we could specify everything in the detailed way apparently called for, socialism could calculate economically and horses might fly. The more modest project of showing that interventions necessarily reduce welfare, productivity, etc., seems entirely sufficient. We can demonstrate that specific interventions benefited, or were meant to benefit, specific parties, even if we can’t account for every dollar in question.

Sciabarra writes:

By focusing on the instrumental nature of the state in these instances, Rothbard provides no means of grasping *structural* bias, since the interventions seem to have no systematic character about them. (p. 285)

Sciabarra then seems to remember that Rothbard's notion of class or caste conflict centers on the state and thereby solves his (Sciabarra's) problem. If Rothbard, in one essay or another, focuses on specific historical actors who "use" the state for the usual, sordid, corporatist reasons, that does not subtract anything from his theoretical analysis, elsewhere, of the *permanent state apparatus* with its "command posts" and all the rest. All we have here is the difference between history and theory.

Rothbard's "dualistic" opposition between state and market (= society) seems entirely on track. His earliest work sought to build upon the distinction between voluntary action and coerced action. The analysis of voluntary vs. coerced social orders promises to be more fruitful than competing approaches, such as, for example, analysis resting on the Hayekian contrast between spontaneous order and designed order. In passing, I would like to call on those who keep talking about social "evolution" to spell out, some time, the many differing meanings which they assign to that term; then, they might pause to justify shifting from one meaning to another.

Rothbard's approach to theory and history suggests, in fact, a fundamental reformulation of the Marxist base/superstructure problem. It is notorious that Marxists have much trouble with this and, in practice, call forth traits or elements from one to explain the other, pretty much as needed. To explain events, Marxist historians constantly call on politics even while denying, in principle, any autonomy to politics as such.

But in Rothbardian terms, "civil society" contains its own culture, law, etc., *before and outside the state*, and the state, as such, can be viewed as entirely parasitic. Civil society is its own "whole" and the state, as superstructure, does not seem to have a necessary relationship to everyone and everything within the confines of a presently bounded political society. Some things *are* contingent.

A related matter is Sciabarra's concern that Rothbard's goal of having societies adopt a libertarian law code is "constructivist" and impossible. Years ago, Felix Morley remarked how odd it was that writers on social contract theory never looked into actual social contracts where they were found, that is, in British North America from the colonial period down to the present. We adopt *constitutions* all the time. What is so inconceivable about a constitutional convention which adopts an anarchist law code? Would the voters ratify it? We can't predict that, but, on the other hand, they have done worse in the past and might be ready for something completely different.

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There are weaknesses, then, in Sciabarra's critique of Rothbard, as well as problems of a more general nature in the book. One is the way in which Sciabarra shifts between dialectics as epistemology and dialectics as underlying reality. Much remains less than clear, leading me to suspect that Sciabarra's own position suffers more from "organicism" than he realizes. On the other hand, his reflections on method are both interesting and welcome. His grasp of the connection between nominalism (atomism) and bad theory—the line from William of Occam to Hobbes to mainstream economics and empiricist statism—is unexceptionable.

I wish to dissuade the reader of the idea that I dislike this book; that is quite untrue. I have been following Chris Sciabarra's work since he first aired his ideas some ten years ago in *Critical Review*, and I have to say that his presentation of them has improved greatly over the years. His demand that we keep track of our levels of abstraction in an organized way is quite in the tradition of C. Wright Mills, and, for that matter, Murray Rothbard.

This is an important book, one which ought to spark serious discussion about libertarianism as a way of looking at society. This is true whether or not one subscribes, in the end, to the author's enthusiasm for dialectics. Yet, despite Sciabarra's brave and wide-ranging attempt to establish a dialectical libertarianism, if we wish to derive useful insights into society and politics from long-standing non-libertarian systems of political and social analysis, we would do much better by looking into classical republicanism than by taking our cues from nineteenth-century thinkers such as Hegel and Marx.

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A. JAMES GREGOR. *THE FACES OF JANUS: MARXISM AND FASCISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY*. NEW HAVEN, CONN.: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2000. Pp. 240.

Thoughtful persons have long compared the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century. Indeed, the application of the word “totalitarian” beyond its original Italian context has been an act of comparison. But since the emergence of Bolshevism and Italian Fascism by the early 1920s, Western scholars—and frequently totalitarian ideologues themselves—have tended to conceptualize the Marxist-Leninist system as a political opposite to Mussolini’s Fascist party and regime, as well as to German National Socialism and the various other “fascist” parties in the thirties. The standard political spectrum taught yearly in thousands of college classrooms only makes sense as a product of this specific conceptualization.

On the other hand, from the 1930s onward (in a few cases one may say from the 1920s onward), classical liberals, libertarians, and paleo-conservatives have, to varying extents, rejected the standard political continuum for the very reason that it seemed to be based on inadequate criteria and even false premises. After all, a spectrum that put Communism and Nazism at diametric extremes distorted reality in significant ways. Yet, rigorous comparisons of Communism and Fascism in mainstream of Western intellectual life have, in most cases, been cut short by reverence for the great “intellectual” orthodoxy that Communism was a great and well-meaning experiment which unfortunately created some “excesses.”

Both for those who have long contemplated the similarities of the supposedly antipodal “extreme right” and “extreme left,” and for those who are just working their way into this fascinating subject, *The Faces of Janus* will be a welcome and highly illuminating work. A. James Gregor is a prolific authority on both Marxism and Fascism, and he offers us here a work of mature, careful, and extensive scholarship on the relationship between Marxism-Leninism and Fascism.

Gregor begins by pointing out some gross disjunctions in Western theories of twentieth-century revolution. Fairly consistently since the 1930s, academic, literary, and intellectual observers have identified Marxist-Leninist and fascist movements as polar opposites. Although some scholars began to apply the term Totalitarian (which came from the Italian Fascist vocabulary) to both “Right” and “Left” forms of ideologically authoritarian regimes, Western academics continued to view Fascism and Soviet Communism in terms of a strict dichotomy.