

will understand them and their goals, problems, fears, and mistakes.” The classical world brought with it much baggage, for example how the slavery of the Greeks and Romans helped the Founders rationalize their holding of slaves while speaking of the virtues of liberty.

Today, public buildings are classical in style, but within them, the principles that animated the American Republic’s creation are often lacking. For anyone who wishes to understand not only how America came to be but also where it may be headed, *First Principles* is an excellent start on this pilgrimage.

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Recovering the Liberal Spirit: Nietzsche, Individuality, and Spiritual Freedom

Steven F. Pittz

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Liberalism, in the classical sense, has always suffered from a miasma of critics who claim they know better. Even as respect for the dignity of the individual, and the political and economic liberty it engenders, grew as a cultural and governing force producing the great fruits of prosperity and peace, communitarians of the left and right grumbled that something was rotten at its core. Liberalism might be good for the pocketbook, and it might be good for the hedonist, but it’s bad for the soul. Its riches and lifestyle options, in other words, come at a spiritual cost. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?

Defenders of the liberal project have typically responded by doubling down on the twin benefits of wealth and choice. It’s better for people to be richer, and nothing gets us richer faster than free and open markets. It’s better for people to be free to author their own lives, and nothing enables that more than getting the coercive might of government out of the way—and also having some extra spending money. But that’s, in a sense, merely restating the anti-individualist, pro-communitarian case. For the kind of person who believes man’s telos is more expansive than “survival” or “happiness” and instead involves being a very particular sort of person, saying that liberalism expands choice and the resources to it is a knock against it, not a fact in its favor.

Enter Steven F. Pittz's *Recovering the Liberal Spirit: Nietzsche, Individuality, and Spiritual Freedom*, a rejoinder to such worries that admits the importance of spiritual growth and argues that liberalism's the best way to get it. His basic argument is that the "free spirit" is a robust and worthwhile alternative to communitarian forms of spirituality, that liberalism allows for and supports free spirits, and that as members of the liberal political project, free spirits bring value to the rest of us. Liberalism has its economic and political defenses. Pittz gives us a spiritual one.

As the title suggests, Pittz draws heavy inspiration from Nietzsche, but the discussion ranges widely enough, and with plenty of original ideas and analysis, that the book ought to be read by anyone interested in liberalism and its critics, and not just by Nietzsche scholars. He begins by setting out just what a free spirit is: "the free spirit is a skeptic with a cheerful temperament who seeks above all to confront life and existence directly, fearlessly hovering over the illusions of tradition, metaphysics, and customary morality." Spiritual fulfillment comes from what one discovers about the universe and oneself, in the form of an intense aesthetic appreciation for life, when carrying through on this direct examination, freed from the blinders and constraints narrowing the perspectives of non-free spirits.

The benefit of liberalism to the free spirit is relatively clear, in that spiritual fulfillment is desirable and valuable, and for someone of such inclination, freedom to experiment with their lives is the best, or only, way to achieve it. And those political institutions that enable free spirits also enable the rest of us to choose to live less skeptically, following more closely tradition and customary morality if that's our jam.

The value of living in a society with free spirits is a little less direct for everyone else, but very real and profound. Free spirits, through heightened examples and experimentation, are vivid signposts pointing us to ways of living we weren't aware of before. Even if we don't choose to live as they do, we have a picture of how we might, and so gain a degree of autonomy and self-mastery in deciding among a greater menu of options. In addition, by detaching from society and its politics, free spirits give us a more nuanced perspective about the importance of both, and so bring the temperature down on ideological debates. If I can see actual examples of people being happy without concern for my ideology, I will be less inclined to force my ideology upon others. This will "change the attitude . . . society has

toward nonconformists, outcasts, or all those who fall outside of the mainstream of politics or culture.” Free spirits make liberalism more liberal.

If I have a worry about the book, however, it’s that the people most in need of recognizing the value of a liberal society to free spirits and of free spirits to the rest of us, are unlikely to view his argument as even getting off the ground. I have in mind illiberals on the left striving to punish those who deviate from the moral codes and language of their woke subculture, and those on the right striving to rebuild America into a pastoral, working-class nostalgia. Unlike the progressives and communitarians Pittz wrestles with in the book’s closing chapters, those influential groups are likely to read *Recovering the Liberal Spirit* not as a defense of liberalism but as a portrait of why it must be abandoned.

Beneath its philosophical veneer, the bulk of illiberalism on both the left and the right, among intellectuals and regular citizens, isn’t about institutional structures or ideological commitments. It’s about intolerance of difference grounded in the idea that the job of politics is to ensure that the world conforms to our personal tastes. From that perspective, free spirits are bad not because of their effects, but because they exist at all. These illiberals might like a society with free spirits in it, but that favor is limited to those who represent heightened and unencumbered distillations of their own preferences, as they represent what they desire themselves to be. To illiberals, free spirits whose aesthetic seeking takes them elsewhere aren’t beneficial, they’re distasteful.

In *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Robert Nozick made the case that you can get from anarchism to a minimal state without violating the rights of non-consenters by, in effect, compensating them for the rights violations of forcing them to live under and pay for a state. But this strategy doesn’t work because the anarchists don’t want to be subject to a state, nor do they want to pay for one, and so forcing them to do both hardly counts as compensation for that compulsion. You can’t rectify a rights violation simply by declaring the violation to instead be a benefit.

While the existence of free spirits isn’t a rights violation, I worry that populists and illiberals will see an analogous move on Pittz’s part. Communitarians worry that liberalism leads to spiritual emptiness through the “disintegration of the connections between ourselves and the things that might bring us spiritual fullness, things like

religion, community, and traditional values,” and Pittz responds by pointing out, correctly, that free spirits are in fact spiritually fulfilled, and that religions and communities needn’t be enforced by the state in order to thrive. But I can’t help but think that communitarians will respond with a simple, “Yeah, but I wasn’t talking about *that* kind of fulfillment.”

It’s striking that the next person Pittz mentions, by way of example, after that passage is Patrick Deneen, who believes it is the role of government to give you spiritual fulfillment, but, as an integralist, he means specifically Catholic spiritual fulfillment. That’s why he’s so sympathetic to Victor Orban’s Hungarian authoritarianism and wouldn’t be persuaded by a case for liberalism grounded in the capacity to find fulfillment in a faith of your own choosing, or in none at all. He might abide by the free spirit Augustine, but he’s not going to see it as a perk that liberalism allows for Timothy Leary.

For this brand of illiberals, the supposed political benefits of free spirits (detachment, lowering the heat of ideologies) are instead *problems* with liberal regimes. It’s not clear how Pittz’s argument can work against a narrower definition of spiritual fullness, or a belief that autonomy is good, so long as it’s the right kind. *Recovering the Liberal Spirit* will speak quite strongly to those on the fence about liberalism’s values. But for those who hold that self-authorship and freedom from society’s values are grand—so long as you don’t express the wrong ideas about curing racism—or that spiritual fulfillment is a higher good—so long as it’s found within Catholicism or the Law of Attraction—it’s likely to be read as a case for the prosecution, not the defense.

That all said, this is a marvelous and thought-provoking book, and it sets out a path for grounding and defending liberalism worth attention and further development.

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