

OBJECTIVISM AND LIBERTARIANISM

When I first heard the term “libertarianism” in the early 1950s, I mentioned it to Ayn Rand as a possible name for our political philosophy. She was suspicious of the term and inclined to dismiss it as a neologism. “It’s a mouthful,” she remarked. “And it sounds too much like a made-up word.”

I answered maybe so, but what alternative did we have? She said, “We’re advocates of *laissez-faire* capitalism.” I answered, sure, but that’s kind of a mouthful too—it’s not a one-word name—and besides, it puts the whole emphasis on economics and politics and we stand for something wider and more comprehensive: we’re champions of individual rights. We’re advocates of a non-coercive society.

I suggested that “libertarianism” could convey all that by means of a single word—especially if we were to define “libertarianism” as a social system that (a) barred the initiation of force from all human relationships and (b) was based on the inviolability of individual rights.

Ayn considered this suggestion briefly, then shook her head and said, “No, it sounds too much like a made-up word.”

Later, when many advocates of *laissez-faire* took up the word, and some of them were anarchists (notably Murray Rothbard), Ayn felt vindicated at rejecting a term broad enough to include Objectivist advocates of pure capitalism, on the one hand, and “anarcho-capitalists,” on the other. She did not realize that the majority of people who called themselves “libertarians” were advocates not of anarchism but of constitutionally limited government (in essence, the Objectivist model), and that she could have fought for her interpretation of the term just as she fought for her interpretation of the word “selfish.” There was no good reason to surrender a much-needed word to the opposition.

Later still, when she saw that libertarians often supported their position with aspects of her philosophy, without necessarily subscribing to the total of Objectivism, she became angrier still and decided that all libertarians were “whim-worshipping subjectivists.”

Being a more balanced and reality-oriented teacher of Objectivism than Leonard Peikoff, David Kelley addressed libertarian groups with the aim of persuading them that Objectivism was the best possible foundation for their political beliefs. For this he was denounced by Peikoff as a traitor to Objectivism. Poor Leonard.

In any event, today libertarianism is part of our language and is commonly understood to mean the advocacy of minimal government. Ayn Rand is commonly referred to as “a libertarian philosopher.” Folks, we are all libertarians now. Might as well get used to it.

About ten years ago, I came across a saying from the Talmud that impressed me profoundly. I have not been able to stop thinking about it. I have often wondered what might have happened if I’d had the chance to discuss the idea with Ayn—if there would have been any way to break through. Who knows what might have been different in the years that followed?

The line that so impressed me was: “A hero is one who knows how to make a friend out of an enemy.”