

21H.181

Libertarianism in History

Paper #1

For Session 2, we read two articles and listened to one radio debate that illustrate certain contemporary libertarian controversies and principles. Since then (and through the end of Part One of the course), we have been “mining” the history and political theory of the idea of liberty for insights into the background, origins, and contexts of those and other contemporary controversies and contexts. For this first paper, please revisit these readings and audio in light of what you have learned in Part One of the course. Your essay should touch on at least two of the three controversies we addressed during Session 2, one of which must be the radio debate between Krueger and Henderson over income inequality. In addition, your analysis should adhere to the following guidelines:

1. You should identify specific readings from our historical survey of the political theory of liberty that you believe relate most closely to the contemporary controversy in question. Having identified those historical materials, you should then explore their meaning and resonance for the contemporary controversy. Why does the NPR debate over income inequality echo, for example, the tension between different understandings of pre-modern liberty as analyzed by Orlando Patterson or Quentin Skinner, for example? Perhaps you think it does not, and that John Rawls or Benjamin Constant is the most relevant authority; in that case, give us a sense of how a “Rawlsian” or other perspective on this issue differs (or would differ) from one of the competing frameworks we have studied in Part One of the course.
2. You are welcome to but need not yourself take a position on the contemporary controversies you choose to analyze. In either case, your paper should make clear what the conflicts are “about” – why they have taken the form they have and why they persist – from a theoretical and historical perspective, again making specific reference to the sources we have studied in Part One.
3. You may find, for example, that Rand Paul’s ideas are remarkably consistent with those of Benjamin Constant or Friedrich Hayek. If so, say so. But there is no requirement here that you “map” a particular theorist or historical source onto a contemporary counterpart. If you see certain traces of the American Declaration of Independence in the dispute over phone surveillance and privacy, be specific about what statements in the Declaration you

have in mind. If you feel that the contemporary controversies reflect elements in the libertarian tradition that we have not explored (through the end of Part One of the course), please identify what you think those elements are and whose views you believe are associated with them. But there is no requirement that you go “outside” the required readings for this course or do any additional research.

4. Identify your sources as specifically as possible, but your citations can be shorthand and either parenthetical or in a footnote (no endnotes please), as in “Patterson p. 35,” or “Nozick p. 230” (using for the latter the pagination from the Sandel reader). If it is an online source that does not have pagination, use paragraph numbers if available, otherwise use direct quotes in quotation marks so as to permit me to recognize the statement from the online version of our source. All factual assertions that go beyond the obvious or beyond widely shared understandings about historical events should be sourced, and your references to the history and political theory of liberty from our syllabus should be sourced as well.

Papers should be 8-10 pages, double-spaced, and are due during Session 12.

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