

# THE FREEMAN

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## Perspective

# I, Liberal

In October a few of us at FEE traveled all the way to Tbilisi, Georgia, one of the former Soviet Union's imperial possessions, to put on a two-day student seminar in the political economy of freedom. Georgia is a scenic country with gracious people. We enjoyed warm hospitality throughout our visit. The Georgians are struggling to make the transition from socialism to liberty, and with the help of a solid core of freedom-philosophy advocates, they might just make it.

Aside from the countless amenities extended to us, it was also nice to be in a place where the word "liberal" is understood. In the linguistically challenged United States, to be a liberal is to favor the government over the individual. Before the word was hijacked in the Progressive Era by devotees of what Ludwig von Mises called "statolatry," a liberal supported private property, free markets, and the rule of law as a bulwark against the state. The words "liberal" and "liberty" obviously share the same root. They originate in the Latin word for "free."

But that's all forgotten. Now that "liberal" is associated with bully government, it has become a dirty word, especially during elections, and no one wants it anymore—not even the advocates of bully government. *The Economist* on November 4 pointed out that it is derisory in Europe too, although over there it retains much of its original meaning.

I'd like to associate myself with what *The Economist* said:

There ought to be a word . . . to stand for what liberalism used to mean. The idea, with its roots in English and Scottish political philosophy of the 18th century, speaks up for individual rights and freedoms, and challenges over-mighty government and other forms of power. In that sense, traditional English liberalism favoured small government—but, crucially, it viewed a government's efforts to legislate religion and personal morality as sceptically as it regarded the attempt to regulate trade (the favoured economic intervention of the age). This, in our view, remains a very appealing, as well as internally consistent, kind of scepticism.

The magazine went on to lament the absurd division of freedom into personal and economic varieties, one for the left and one for the right: “That separation explains how it can be that the same term is now used in different places to say opposite things. What is harder to explain is why ‘liberal’ has become such a term of abuse. When you understand that the tradition it springs from has changed the world so much for the better in the past two and a half centuries, you might have expected all sides to be claiming the label for their own exclusive use.”

There is no better person to turn to for insight into the changing notion of liberalism than Herbert Spencer, who examined the matter in “The New Toryism,” found in his 1884 collection *The Man Versus the State* (online, thanks to the Liberty Fund, at [www.econlib.org/library/LFBooks/Spencer/spnMvS.html](http://www.econlib.org/library/LFBooks/Spencer/spnMvS.html)). Not so ironically, Spencer worked at *The Economist* from 1848 (five years after its founding) to 1853.

Spencer reminded his readers that two types of societies had long been in contention: the militant, or status-based, type versus the industrial, or contract-based, type. Advocates of the latter, who later became known as both Whigs and Liberals, accomplished the Herculean task of “resist[ing] and decreas[ing] the coercive power of the ruler over the subject.” After detailing this earth-shaking record, Spencer wrote, “[I]t seems needful to remind everybody what Liberalism was in the past, that they may perceive its unlikeness to the so-called Liberalism of the present. . . . They have lost sight of the truth that in past times Liberalism habitually stood for individual freedom versus State-coercion.”

This raises the question Spencer wishes to answer: “How is it that Liberalism . . . has grown more and more coercive in its legislation?” It was a case of confused thinking. Later activists mistook Liberalism’s elimination of coercive government “hindrances to happiness” for the use of coercive government to achieve the good directly. “And seeking to gain it directly, they have used methods intrinsically opposed to those originally used.”

Today’s *Economist* editors wisely prefer that left and right continue to shun the word “liberal,” leaving it to “its original owner[s]. That will free ‘liberal’ to be used

exclusively from now on in its proper sense, as we shall continue to use it regardless.”

Same here.

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If government is ever to be restrained, it will have to be deprived of its power over money and banking. Richard Ebeling makes the case in connection with a country that has no central bank: Panama.

February 5 marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of that passionate champion of capitalism, novelist-philosopher Ayn Rand. Chris Matthew Sciabarra contributes a centennial appreciation.

All kinds of political impositions are justified in the name of consensus. Russell Madden deconstructs that treacherous notion.

As California goes, so goes the nation—and Los Angeles is experiencing an alarming loss of emergency-room service. Steven Greenhut describes a scary development that could be coming to a city near you.

Hitting someone over the head has never been an effective way to win him to one’s point of view. Ralph Hood learned this the hard way and now is reformed.

Take me out to the ballgame. Take me out to the crowd. Buy me some peanuts and crackerjacks, just as long as I don’t pay that tax. Ray Keating shows why no one should be forced to pay for a stadium.

The words “Lear” and “jet” go together like peanut and butter. But who was Bill Lear? Anthony Young knows.

Last October, Congress ended the 70-year-old tobacco price-support program. That was the good news. The bad news is that smokers will be forced to pay off the tobacco farmers. E. C. Pasour, Jr., explains.

Searching the political-economic landscape, our columnists have come up with this: Richard Ebeling explains political corruption. Donald Boudreaux ponders the nature of progress. Burton Folsom relates a story from the days of the underground railroad. Walter Williams considers the moral underpinnings of a free society. And Jane Orient, reading the claim that America needs socialized medicine, replies, “It Just Ain’t So!”

Our reviewers render verdicts on books about the status of nations, the morality of the market, the racial gap in learning, and politics. — Sheldon Richman

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