

# Book Review: Engaging Enemies: Hayek and the Left

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2015/04/27/engaging-enemies-hayek-and-the-left/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2015/04/27/engaging-enemies-hayek-and-the-left/)

27/04/2015

Engaging Enemies uses the left's late discovery of Hayek to examine the contemporary fate of socialism and social democracy. Did socialism survive the twentieth century? Did it collapse with the fall of the Berlin Wall as Hayek claimed? Or did it transform into something else, and if so what? **Thomas Joassin** found that in spite of the focus on British politics, this book offers a more global perspective on the impact of liberal ideas on the policies of European governments over the last three decades.

**Engaging Enemies: Hayek and the Left. Simon Griffiths. Rowman & Littlefield. 2014.**

---

This book evokes Hayek's influence on British left thinkers in the last few decades. The author, Simon Griffiths, is a Politics lecturer at Goldsmith, and this work, made of six concise but straightforward chapters, offers an engaging argument about the liberal roots of contemporary left thought. It not only narrates a recent history of socialist ideas, but it also attempts to show how ideas and political thinkers may have a concrete impact on policies of their time. Although it focuses on British politics, this book is a pertinent read for those interested in the history and politics of the Old Continent, because the author's argument relates to a particular understanding of Europe's recent history.

Although much of the book deals with the ideological impact of the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, it also makes us think more of the neo-liberal turn of the 1980s that took place in many countries around the world. As a French national studying at the LSE, I could not avoid thinking of two specific moments in the history of the 5<sup>th</sup> Republic. Each of these events, in 1983 and 2014, took place two years after the election of a 'Socialist' President, and saw the advent of 'social-liberal' governments that were less statist and more pro-market than their predecessors. These events were representative of the ideological tensions that troubled political parties on the left, a part of the political spectrum that, especially in France, still oscillate between liberal and socialist understandings of the state's role in a globalised economy. In this respect, Griffith's work is very welcoming: in spite of its focus on British politics, it really offers a more global perspective on the impact of liberal ideas on the policies of our European governments over the last three decades.

Griffith offers, for example, an interesting perspective on the way that Labour and Socialist thinkers started to distance themselves from a class-based understanding of the economy by adopting codes of identity politics, notably by focusing on social movements that could represent the "increasingly pluralistic society". As it is known, Hayek argued against the "all-knowing state" with his theory of dispersed knowledge (knowledge possessed by individuals, not by the central-planning state). The author shows how Hilary Wainwright used Hayek's anti-statist, libertarian stance in a "socialist" perspective, i.e. by demonstrating that knowledge was a social (rather than individual) product. He explains how this knowledge could be used by social movements in order to "combine the insights of individual experiences" and to meet shared goals. The main problem, as shown by the journalist Paul Anderson in this chapter, lies in the re-partition of power within these social movements as power is often "concentrated in the hands of paid professionals". He shows that it might also be naïve to fail to consider the way states and governments use social movements and their networks for political aims.

Yet, although left thinkers such as Wainwright and Andrew Gamble have been influenced by Hayek and neoliberal thought, the author shows that the roots of these political trends are also present in the work of earlier English pluralists or in 20<sup>th</sup> century anarchist traditions such as in Proudhon's mutualism. Communitarian anarchists also had an important impact on David Miller's work, analyzed in Chapter 2 ('The rise and fall of market socialism'), and whose market socialism reveals some interesting egalitarian dimensions. Miller's idea was to transfer power from the state to workers, and he thus contrasts social ownership of enterprises from state or private ownership. In this view, the market remains the best means of providing goods and services, but "ownership is socialised" through the

constitution of productive enterprises as workers' co-operatives.

What some liberals and socialist anarchist thinkers share is a certain skepticism about the state, which they do not generally see as morally or economically sovereign, and their ideological discussions have been fruitful for the left insofar as they could provide more freedom and equality for the most vulnerable. However, the focus on individualism and consumer culture seems like a fundamental rupture with early socialist traditions, which took into account potential issues of alienation and dependence related to consumption practices. Reading Gamble and Giddens' discussion of individual responsibility, in Chapter 5 ("The revival of liberalism"), raises interrogations about their view of the community's role towards the poorest in our societies. The move away from what they call "paternalism", which Hayek rejected too, meant that individuals no longer had unconditional rights and, particularly, their individual "autonomy" should be matched by new obligations, i.e. they should "take responsibility for themselves" and not rely on society.

This is where the contemporary focus of social-liberal thought on economic freedom seems to break with socialism. The ideological evolution as described in the book indeed gave me the feeling that concrete moral and political arguments were left for a vision of society restricted to its economic dimension. In chapter 2, Miller's anti-statist and pro-enterprise argument, in spite of some of its egalitarian dimensions, reveals this new approach to consumer culture that considers individual freedom to be present "in consumer choice, and in workers' rights to move in and out of enterprises". Hayek's influence on socialist thought seems to have transformed comrades and citizens into dehumanised consumers.

Moreover, these opposed conceptions of the individual's role within socialist thought seem to reveal a more global and historical tension between socialist trends, something that is not put into perspective in the book. First thinkers of original socialism (Pierre Leroux, Victor Considerant etc.) were already very critical of the individualist ideology of many Enlightenment thinkers, and considered that society was not just as an aggregate of individuals looking to fulfill their private, selfish interests; and the history of ideas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is full of such intellectual confrontations.

I am aware that this is a book on British politics and Hayek's influence, and it is already great to see the author making many references to early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers. However, the question of the left's liberal influences may need to be raised in a longer historical perspective. This work remains very pertinent because it brings new perspectives to questions that many left thinkers constantly raise, notably when attempting to understand the ambiguous path that many European so-called left governments have taken in recent years.

---

**Thomas Joassin** is a research student in social anthropology at the LSE, and holds a BA in philosophy, politics and economics. His research focuses on Islam in contemporary Algeria, with a special interest in Sufism.

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books