

*New book explores the principles of historiography*

# A Brief History of the History of Liberty

Liberal ideas, including libertarianism among their modern descendants, have had profound influence on the study of history and conceptions of how historians should approach their task. Unlike those in some other ideological schools, liberal scholars have never combined these principles into a single official theory elevated to the status of ideological dogma. For some liberal historians, that's part of the point. But that doesn't mean that there aren't principles that have informed how advocates of liberty have approached the topic.

Providing insight into this "history of history" is the purpose of *The Liberal Approach to the Past: A Reader*, edited by Georgetown University's Michael J. Douma and newly released by Cato's Libertarianism.org. As Douma explains in the introduction, "this reader contains a carefully selected collection of writings on historical methods and the philosophy of history penned by liberal historians," ranging from 19th-century classical liberals such as James Anthony Froude and Heinrich Reichert to 20th century libertarians like F. A. Hayek and Roy A. Childs Jr. Many had fallen out of publication and were located through Douma's own archival research.

Douma identifies four broad principles that liberal historians have been associated with, some of which have become mainstream practice. The first, which might seem self-evident, was once not nearly so universally accepted. That is the idea that "historical writing should aim to describe reality" and that this reality is objective and can be constructed from evidence to produce accurate historical accounts. The purpose of history is to record and reflect reality, not to propagandize contemporary politics or tell morality tales.

The second principle is that historical knowledge is different from the natural sci-

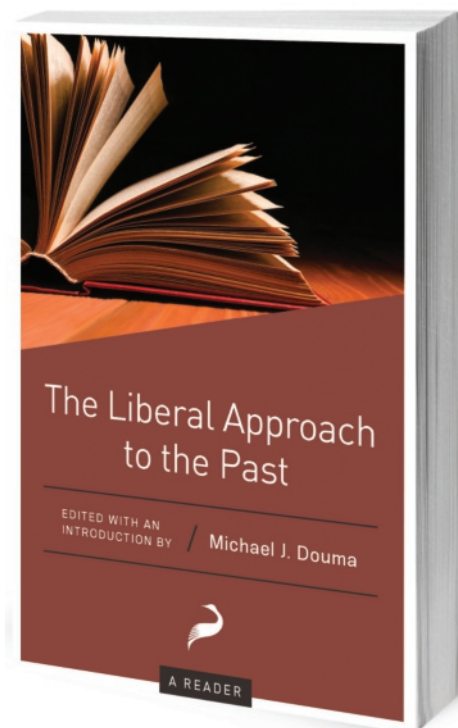
ences and social sciences and that history is an autonomous discipline with its own methods. Thus, liberal historians have largely resisted efforts by other disciplines to apply their ill-suited methodologies to the study of history. What works for identifying the mechanisms of atomic chemistry or planetary physics will not get you very far in trying to determine why a nation's parliament passed a particular bill in a particular form in a particular year.

The third principle is one that has been relevant to a number of ideological disputes, particularly but not exclusively with Marxist schools of thought. This is a firm rejection of any notion of "laws of history" or historical determinism. There is no grand sweeping outside force, be it class or race or abstractly defined progress, that acts as a script dictating the actions of individuals or the widely differing contexts of time and place.

As Douma explains in his introduction, "To liberal ears, any defense of 'laws of history' suggests that the behavior of individuals is limited or determined. It seems that to retain our moral judgment, both as historians and as historical actors, we require at a minimum the freedom to think and act."

Finally, liberal historians have insisted on methodological individualism and have opposed personifying abstractions such as the nation-state of *Volksgeist*. Only individuals act, and their actions must be explained as such. Abstractions are at best useful for everyday speech, but they should not be personified and made the subject of independent analysis as if they were real historical actors.

Some of these principles have become so widespread that they are no longer unique to political liberals, but rather reflect simply mainstream assumptions about the correct way to conduct writing and research about history. Others remain contested, sometimes on their own merits and sometimes



for the way in which they clash with the ideological priors of nonliberals.

Austrian-born economist Joseph Schumpeter provided one rebuttal of historical determinism in emphasizing the transformative role of ideas. History takes place in the context of material conditions, but the real motive force is how individuals react to those conditions, which are shaped by their ideas and values. Change is brought about by creativity, and not merely the deterministic application of material conditions.

Views about history and its nature reflect important premises about our view of reality itself and human nature. In illuminating these principles, *The Liberal Approach to the Past: A Reader* offers an important addition to the literature and addresses a topic that has too often been neglected in the study of liberal ideas. ■

**THE LIBERAL APPROACH TO THE PAST: A READER IS AVAILABLE AT [CATO.ORG/BOOKS](http://CATO.ORG/BOOKS) AND THROUGH BOOKSELLERS AND ONLINE RETAILERS NATIONWIDE.**