

BOOKS

DEFENDING THE UNDEFENDABLE. By Walter Block. New York: Fleet Press. 1976. 256 pp. \$9.95.

Reviewed by Sharon Presley

Defending the Undefendable has sparked quite a bit of controversy within the libertarian movement—possibly even as much as the great minarchist-anarchist debate. The book has been warmly endorsed by Murray Rothbard, Harry Browne, Thomas Szasz, and even F. A. Hayek, yet strongly attacked in *Libertarian Review* and *Laissez Faire Review*. Though wide support exists for both positions, my previous negative evaluation in *Laissez Faire Review* elicited more favorable comments and mail than anything *LFR* has ever published. How can a book be so thoroughly detested by many and yet endorsed by such prestigious libertarians?

The polarization of opinions on Block's book should not be surprising. It is a reflection of the book's schizophrenic nature—a bizarre combination of both excellent and horrible elements. On a deeper level, the polarization is symptomatic of a fundamental division within the libertarian approach to social issues—what might be called the "economistic" and the "humanistic" approaches. Economism, whether libertarian or Marxist, insists on explaining all human action almost exclusively in terms of economics. Humanism takes a broader view and heavily weighs psychological and social factors in its analysis and recommendations for social change.

Apparently the endorsers chose to consider only the Dr. Jekyll side of *Defending the Undefendable* and either ignored or failed to take seriously Mr. Hyde. It is true that the political and economic analyses are generally libertarian. Block defends the right of deviant but nonaggressive individuals to engage in voluntary activities with no political restriction. The "undefendables" include, for example, pimps, prostitutes, slumlords, moneylenders, and scabs. Block's showing that these people are merely engaging in market exchange is valid and important. When we see that his "heroes" also include counterfeiters, blackmailers, and male chauvinist pigs, however, we begin to suspect that something pe-

culiar is going on.

If Block had been content to stop with just a simple, straightforward presentation of the nonaggression principle and Austrian economic analysis, the book could have served a useful and much-needed function. The rights of "deviants" and "socially undesirable" people must be preserved and protected in a truly free society. But Block proceeds to destroy the potential value of his analysis by taking on a deliberately shocking tone that he apparently considers witty but comes across to many libertarians and nonlibertarians alike as smart-alecky and offensive.

The most obvious example of Block's sensationalistic style (as well as his lack of rigor) is his insistence on calling the subjects of his book "heroes." His definition, however, simply does not correspond with dictionary or common usage. He cites three criteria: the action must not violate the rights of others, it must provide a great benefit, and it must be performed at great risk. But the concept of hero, correctly understood, clearly implies the attainment of great values. To call someone a hero simply because he or she defies social convention is a blatantly unacceptable use of the word and sure to elicit justifiably hostile reactions.

Curiously enough, Block's use of the word is often inconsistent with his own definition. To suggest that the miser, inheritor of wealth, and the litterer, for example, undergo great risk is just plain silly. Of course, if the litterer is a member of the Sierra Club he would risk the approbation of his peers, but otherwise he is unlikely even to be reprimanded.

Because Block does bring in non-economic factors, one wishes he didn't undercut the soundness of his political and economic analyses by supporting them with social and psychological assumptions that show a mind-boggling lack of understanding of human behavior in the real world. At best these assumptions are frivolous (the litterer risks great approbation) but often take on a much more callous and appalling tone (charity interferes with the survival of the species).

Block's analysis of pimps and prostitutes is a good illustration of how out of touch with social reality he is.

He blithely asserts that "the prostitute obviously prefers her work, otherwise she would not continue it." Also, she "does not look upon the sale of sex as demeaning." There may be some "happy hookers," but the serious sociological and psychological literature shows that women are far more likely to become prostitutes out of financial and psychological desperation, rather than on the basis of rational career planning. As for pimps, Block's implication that the use of coercion among pimps is no more serious a problem than the occasional bank embezzler strikes me as truly bizarre, considering that Block lived in New York City for many years.

Another example of his unsupported armchair analysis of social interaction is in his chapter on the "male chauvinist pig." Block argues that "secretary-pinching" is implicitly accepted in a package deal with the job. But to claim that every case of sexual aggression against women office workers is always implicitly accepted ahead of time is sheer fantasy! Perhaps he thinks that most people define "secretary" as one who types and who submits to pinches. There are no doubt some offices where such activities are known ahead of time, but in all my office experiences, I have known no women (and few men) who are aware of a general implicit contract, much less agree with it. And there can't be a contract, implicit or otherwise, if one of the parties has no knowledge of the contract.

Block also argues that because the male chauvinist pig resists coercive egalitarianism, he should be considered a hero. Can Block be serious? If so, why is there no chapter on the racist as hero?

The most muddled and appalling chapter is the one on charity. In the second part of the chapter, Block offers a valid argument against *public*-forced-charity. But he isn't satisfied with this; he has to muddy the waters by launching an attack in the first part of the chapter implying that *all* charity is bad. Since he never defines charity, it may not be clear to all that what he is primarily attacking is "welfare." (He seems to change implicit definitions in mid-chapter.) But this sets up a straw man; charity includes private voluntary organizations like the United Fund and Red Cross. He may not intend to condemn private charity (it is unclear), but his failure to exempt them explicitly will certainly be interpreted by many as condemnation. Libertarians have been struggling to convince nonlibertarians that in a free

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society private charity would adequately replace public charity; we don't need a Walter Block coming along and saying charity is evil!

Worse yet are Block's grounds for attacking charity. He argues that "one of the great evils of charity" is that "it interferes with the survival of the species." (This is a repellent, inhumane, and oddly collectivist statement from a libertarian, one supposedly concerned with the good of *individuals*.) Anyway, charity does *not* interfere with the survival of the species; evolution works through the population group, not the individual. (So unless Block expects large sections of the populace eliminated, the "harmful traits" would survive.) Further, the "negative" traits that Block cites as examples—"allergy to smoke, excessive argumentativeness"—have no apparent connection with ability to survive, much less charity!

Even some of Block's economic arguments fall apart. He calls the counterfeiter a hero, claiming that, after all, paper money is already counterfeit. But the passing of counterfeit money is a fraud since people believe it to be genuine government issue (regardless of its actual economic worth). The real crime of the counterfeiter is not that he copies worthless government notes but that he passes on his own worthless notes to innocent victims. The counterfeiter is an aggressor, and Block's sophistry will not make it otherwise.

Left libertarians have often accused individualist libertarians of being interested only in "property, not people." It is writers like Block who give libertarianism this false image. This book is indeed symptomatic of the economic approach that is all too prevalent among libertarians.

Block and the advocates of economism pride themselves on their rationality and logic, often dismissing noneconomic and nonpolitical concerns as irrelevant. "Humanism" smacks too much of "left deviationism." In fact, however, mechanistic reduction of complex human behavior to mere response to economic stimuli can be faulted on sophisticated logical and empirical grounds—just has been successfully done with economism's psychological analog, behaviorism.

Analyses like Block's not only ignore or distort noneconomic social and psychological considerations, and thus give a false picture of human behavior; they also misrepresent the views of a significant portion of the movement. Many libertarians believe that humane concerns and uncompro-

misg libertarian principles are *not* mutually exclusive and cannot be artificially separated. Further, Block's mechanistic interpretation fails to do justice to the inherent nobility and dignity of libertarian ideals.

The insensitivity and frivolousness of Block's attitudes and assumptions serve to confuse and distract from the validity of his other points. These offensive attitudes will surely reinforce the worst stereotypes of advocates of capitalism. To fail to take this reaction into account is a serious and puzzling mistake on the part of the endorsers.

In balancing the good—valid economic and political analysis—and the bad—faulty logic, a mechanistic and insensitive view of human behavior, superficiality, shoddiness, and amorality—I have to conclude that the book will do more harm than good. It is a positive menace to the libertarian movement and dramatically demonstrates Rand's statement that the worst enemies of capitalism are its defenders. □

Sharon Presley is co-proprietor of *Laissez-Faire Books* in New York and editor of its *Laissez Faire Review* and Catalog. A libertarian activist since 1964, she is National Coordinator of the Association of Libertarian Feminists.

with human problems by going to basics, to what it is about the many folks who did wrong that could be changed peacefully, in such a way that no injustice is done. For scapegoating is unjust, it is the imputation of collective guilt, it is evading the requirement of proof where due process—*morally due*, that is—requires it.

I have not defended unions, corporations, blacks, etc. That would be silly—like defending the existence of labor, business, or my height. That is just the point worth reflecting on in connection with *attacking* the same sorts of elements of our culture. We are all in it and some are better, some worse, as human beings. That is the only thing that counts fundamentally. The rest are unfortunate, at times, malicious, diversions.

Tibor Machan teaches philosophy at SUNY-Fredonia. Dr. Machan's viewpoint appears in this column every third month.

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MOVIES

● The new year is off to a promising start with an enjoyable comedy-drama, **SILVER STREAK**. The title refers to a fictional American version of the late lamented Orient Express, in this case a trainload of intrigue on the "Silver Streak" from Los Angeles to Chicago. Gene Wilder is in top form as a mild-mannered book publisher who boards the train for a few days of peace and quiet, only to become involved with the lovely Jill Clayburgh and a series of bizarre murders. Richard Pryor, who makes an unexpected entrance halfway through the movie, contributes to its lively pace as a jive-talking, small-time thief who knows all the angles. Ned Beatty gives solid support as a fellow passenger on a secret mission, and Patrick McGoohan is coolly menacing as the lead villain. The violence, while not excessive, is realistic enough to remind the audience that *Silver Streak* is a drama as well as a comedy; but for the most part, the two elements manage to avoid clashing with each other. Despite his mishaps (he keeps falling or being pushed off the train), Wilder emerges as a sympathetic and resourceful hero, and his on-board romance with Clayburgh is handled with wit, charm and style. Many of the comedy sequences are side-splitting, especially Pryor's attempt to disguise Wilder as a spaced-

out black man. Colin Higgins' brisk screenplay is energetically directed by Arthur Hiller, and the movie's two-hour running time seems to go by much faster. Rated "PG."

— Charles F. Barr

● With *Obsession*, director Brian DePalma proved he could successfully imitate Alfred Hitchcock. Now, with **CARRIE**, he makes a strong bid to become Hitchcock's heir apparent. Although *Carrie* is somewhat more violent than the patented Hitchcock product (and definitely not for the squeamish), the film achieves its terrifying and shocking effects in the context of an integrated plot and three-dimensional characters. Sissy Spacek triumphs in the difficult role of Carrie White, a high school senior who is treated as an outsider by her classmates, and made the butt of cruel jokes. Piper Laurie, returning to films after a long absence, is effective as Carrie's demented mother, a Bible-thumping, anti-sex fanatic. The plot is concocted from three ingredients: Carrie's discovery that she has the power of telekinesis (the ability to move objects with her mind); her earnest, forlorn attempt to win acceptance from her classmates; and a vicious prank being prepared by several girls in her class, who are unaware of Carrie's

new "supernatural" power. It all comes together at the Senior Prom, when the prank sets off a chain reaction of shocks that leave most of the audience numb at the end. Director DePalma is innovative in his purposeful use of slow motion and other special effects. The pacing is carefully timed and the camera work is extraordinary. Lawrence Cohen's screenplay, from Stephen King's novel, deftly primes the audience for the movie's dizzying, hair-raising climax. For sheer power, *Carrie* is a worthy successor to *The Exorcist* and *Jaws*. Rated "R."

—C.F.B.

● Devoted Woody Guthrie fans may be able to sit through **BOUND FOR GLORY**, a two-and-a-half hour melange of plotless tedium based on Guthrie's autobiography. There is little to interest anyone else in this rambling tale of a not very likeable folk singer. Played by David Carradine, Guthrie comes across as a talented but irresponsible drifter, a "free spirit" who throws away a promising career and neglects his family to indulge his whims. To compound the felony, the film is heaped with the most stale clichés of liberal "social consciousness." In this instance, it's the downtrodden migrant farm workers vs. the greedy, exploiting, violent, tyrannical etc. landowners and food processors. Ronny Cox as a country singer and farm union organizer, Melinda Dillon as Guthrie's long-suffering wife, and Randy Quaid as an out-of-luck farm worker deliver adequate supporting performances. Robert Getchell's screenplay and Hal Ashby's direction creak along slowly, when they move at all. The movie's only superior technical achievement is courtesy of special effects wizard Albert Whitlock and director of photography Haskell Wexler, who capture the reality of a Texas dust bowl storm with vivid imagery. As for the rest of the movie, anyone going to see *Bound for Glory* is probably bound for boredom. Rated "PG."

—C.F.B.

● Here are my picks for the "bests" of 1976, a better-than-average movie year:

Best picture: *Network*.

Best actor: Cliff Robertson in *Obsession*.

Best actress: Faye Dunaway in *Network*.

Best supporting actor: Richard Pryor in *Silver Streak*.

Best supporting actress: Talia Shire in *Rocky*.

Best director: Brian DePalma for *Carrie*.

—C.F.B.



Richard Pryor, right, helps disguise Gene Wilder as a black man in **SILVER STREAK**.