



Are We Really Free?

The Free Society, by Laurence M. Vance:
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pages, paperback.

Americans often boast that they live in a free country. Our national anthem says we live in the “land of the free,” and another popular patriotic song contains the line, “at least I know I’m free.”

But how free are we really? According to conservative Christian libertarian writer Laurence M. Vance in his latest book, *The Free Society*, Americans live in a “relatively free” society. As Vance notes in the summary of the book on the back cover,



Most Americans think they live in a free society. They think that because they can find fifty varieties of salad dressing at the grocery store, choose from among a hundred types of wine at the liquor store, select a television channel from over 1,000 choices, download any movie or song they want from the Internet, and sit at home for hours playing the latest video game that they live in a free society. They are oblivious to the extent of government encroachment on their freedoms. They are complacent when it comes to government edicts. And they are ignorant as to what a free society really means.

So what, then, is a “free society”? In his typical clear, detailed manner, Vance explains this in *The Free Society*.

The Free Society is a collection of 127 of Vance’s essays, written between 2005 and 2017. The book is divided into seven chapters, each chapter containing essays related to the particular chapter title.

Chapter 1, “Libertarianism: Theory,” provides the reader an introduction as to what is, and is not, libertarianism. Vance makes clear that just because someone smokes pot, owns an AR-15, or lives an “alternative” sexual lifestyle does not mean he is a libertarian. As Vance writes in one of the essays in Chapter 1,

I am a libertarian. I subscribe to the non-aggression principle that says, in the words of Murray Rothbard: “The only proper role of violence is to defend person and property against violence, that any use of violence that goes beyond such just defense is itself aggressive, unjust, and criminal. Libertarianism, therefore, is a theory which states that everyone should be free of violent invasion, should be free to do as he sees fit except invade the person or property of another.”...

I am a libertarian. I am not a libertine. I am not a hedonist. I am not a moral relativist. I am not a devotee of some alternative lifestyle. I am not a revolutionary. I am not a nihilist. I neither wish to associate with nor aggress against those who are. I believe in the absolute freedom of association and discrimination.

Chapter 2, entitled “Libertarianism: Practice,” offers libertarian views on various hot-button issues in



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America, such as education, healthcare, poverty, foreign policy, and the economy.

In Chapter 3, “Libertarianism vs. Liberalism/Conservatism,” Vance compares the libertarian views on the aforementioned issues to those proffered by liberals and conservatives, who both feel that society’s problems should be solved by some sort of government program or intervention. A libertarian, Vance explains, is opposed to the solutions given by both liberals and conservatives, since government has no business trying to “solve” society’s problems with taxpayers’ money and government agencies.

In Chapter 4, “Discrimination and Free Association,” Vance addresses an issue that many on the Left and Right often feel warrants government regulation: businesses discriminating. In a free society, writes Vance, business owners should be able to discriminate against anyone for any reason or for no reason at all, regardless if it is bigoted, racist, intolerant, or just plain stupid. The government should not use force to make people not discriminate, as that goes beyond the proper role of government.

Chapter 5, “Victimless Crimes,” deals with issues such as soliciting prostitution, drug use, and gambling, which Vance calls “vices.” Vices are not crimes, he writes, and therefore government should not attempt to regulate or criminalize such behaviors.

In Chapter 6, “The Free Market,” Vance elaborates on controversial subjects such as “price gouging,” minimum-wage laws, and a “just price.” For libertarians, Vance writes, there is no such thing as “price gouging” since any price agreed upon between a seller and a willing buyer is a “just price.” Laws against “price gouging,” therefore, should not exist. As for a minimum wage, again, the government should not get involved. Whatever wage a person and his prospective employer agree upon should be allowed in a free society. Vance also takes to task the whole concept of government-mandated licensing requirements for many occupations (the laws for which, of course, vary greatly from state to state):

Proponents of occupational licensing would have us believe that without licensing, barbers would give customers bad haircuts, cosmetologists would ruin their hair, fire-alarm installers would incorrectly wire fire alarms, bartenders would mix us the wrong drinks, coaches would never win a game, funeral attendants would not properly dress one’s dead grandmother, EMTs would allow patients to die, travel agents would book travelers on wrong flights, accountants would prepare incorrect financial statements, security guards would allow burglars to break in, child-care workers would molest children, skin-care specialists would damage customers’ skin, taxi drivers would drop passengers off on the wrong street, pest-control applicators would not be able to kill bugs, sign-language interpreters would tell deaf people the wrong thing, pharmacy technicians would give out the wrong drugs, taxidermists wouldn’t stuff a dead pet properly, auctioneers would not be able to sell anything, and milk samplers would allow sour milk to be distributed.

Vance suggests private certification for occupations, such as ASE certification for auto mechanics, is a much better option.

Chapter 7, “The Free Society,” discusses various issues such as tobacco laws, drinking-age laws, handicapped parking, discounts for certain groups and not others, and other miscellaneous areas in which government regulations prevent Americans from living in a truly free society.

Vance, being a conservative Christian, is opposed to abortion and believes it should not be legal. While this is contrary to the view of many calling themselves libertarians, Vance explains that being anti-abortion is perfectly consistent with the non-aggression principle of libertarianism:

I have argued ... that because the non-aggression axiom is central to libertarianism, and because force is justified only in self-defense, and because it is wrong to threaten or initiate violence against



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a person or his property, and because killing is the ultimate form of aggression that, to be consistent, libertarians should be opposed to abortion....

Being pro-life and libertarian is not contradictory. However, being pro-life and conservative may very well be because of the conservative propensity to support acts of violence committed by the U.S. military. Because of their opposition to senseless foreign wars and an interventionist foreign policy, libertarians can actually be more consistently pro-life than conservatives.

Many libertarians are also in favor of what they (and many others) call same-sex marriage. As a Christian, Vance believes that a same-sex union is not a legitimate marriage, but he also believes that government should have nothing to do with marriage in the first place. In this case, same-sex marriage would be neither legal nor illegal.

So do Americans live in a free society? When compared to countries such as North Korea, China, Iran, Cuba, or Venezuela, America certainly looks like a bastion of freedom. But upon closer examination, one quickly realizes that Americans are subject to a great number of restrictions on their freedoms from an overreaching “nanny state” government, on a level greater than that of some socialist European nations.

The main premise of *The Free Society* is that people should be free to live as they wish without government interference as long as they are not doing violence to anyone else. This includes being able to run businesses as they wish free of government regulation. It is not the government’s role to limit a person’s freedoms, unless that person has limited another person’s freedoms.

The Free Society is well-written, informative, and, as mentioned above, written in Vance’s typical clear, detailed manner. Vance lays out his arguments very well, and it is difficult to disagree with his reasoning.

As far as any negatives, the book is a collection of essays, so there is some overlap of material within chapters, but Vance mentions this in the introduction, and it is not really an obstacle. One point that some might consider a flaw in the book is that Vance does not discuss immigration/borders and free trade/tariffs, both topics of interest to many libertarians and Americans in general.

Vance’s book is an excellent compilation of essays on the topics he addresses, and overall does a very good job of making the case for a free society. Readers who do not consider themselves libertarians could certainly find the book worthwhile, and will certainly have their views challenged on some points.

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