

[Reassessing Hayek](#) [1]

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I've just started the final draft of a new primer on the great 'Austrian School' (and Nobel) economist and political thinker F.A. Hayek. Perhaps more than anyone, Hayek kept alive the flame of liberty at a time, after the Second World War, where freedom had few friends. Communism had seized Eastern Europe, and in Western Europe, intellectuals were smitten by the appeal of state planning and confident in their abilities to 'win the peace' through greater government planning, spending and controls.

I wrote an [earlier introduction to Hayek \(download\)](#) [3], published in 1983, which I am glad to say won many plaudits. Many people tell me it was their first introduction to the ideas of this seminal thinker. To some, indeed, it was their first exposure to the case for free markets and the free society, and to the explanation of why communism proved impossible to sustain in the long term.

But in recent years I have begun to see shortcomings in the earlier book. Hayek was still alive and active at the time, and I continued to meet him, either at meetings of the Mont Pelerin Society (the international association of liberal ? in the European sense ? academics, commentators, businesspeople and others). So it was hard to be objective. As time has passed, it is possible to put Hayek more into his historical context ? remember, in 1983 the Iron Curtain had not fallen, and many people were still dismissing Hayek's predictions that communism would fail big-time. And as his ideas have spread, there has also been more criticism of them, some of it quite useful, which must be taken into account.

I like to think the earlier book was accessible, thanks partly to my colleague Madsen Pirie's injunction that none of the words I used should be more than an inch long. Not easy with Hayek or any of the Austrians, but with the exception of one mention of 'spontaneous' I managed it. But as I re-read it, I still think the book may seem a little too technical, in some places a little too detailed, and overall a little too long, for lay readers such as school and college students who may be interested in the principles of social organisation but who have no background in economics or political science. So this one, I hope will be a genuine primer. It should be out in the summer, so you will be able to tell me if I succeeded.

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