

# Some Factual Errors in the Latest *Slate* Attack on Libertarianism

Matt Welch | June 21, 2011

*The New Republic's* Jonathan Chait is **unimpressed** by my "**rebuttal**" to Stephen Metcalf's *Slate* **essay** about libertarians and the philosopher Robert Nozick. This is probably due to the fact that I didn't write one.

However, others have, and I want to make sure **Chait** has sufficient reading material before his next squash game with **Jacob Weisberg**. I recommend:

\* Will Wilkinson, in *The Economist*, on Metcalf's claim that Ludvig von Mises and F.A. Hayek were "in with the nutters and the shills," because "between them, Von Hayek and Von Mises never seem to have held a single academic appointment that didn't involve a corporate sponsor":

This attempt to marginalise two great thinkers is as lazy as it is dishonest. A little light googling is enough to establish the basic facts, but it seems Mr Metcalf could not be bothered.

[*much evidence cited*] [...]

If only a levee separated polite discourse from the sort of ax-grinding indifference to fairness and truth Mr Metcalf displays in his essay.

\* **Brad DeLong**, on Metcalf's claim that John Maynard Keynes "scribble[d] in the margins of his copy of *The Road to Serfdom*[...]: 'An extraordinary example of how, starting with a mistake, a remorseless logician can end up in Bedlam':

Keynes did not write this on the margin of any book. He did not write it by hand. He said it in print [...] in 1931 in the journal *Economica*--13:34 (November), pp. 387-97, "The Pure Theory of Money: A Reply to Dr. Hayek", and it was of Hayek's *Prices and Production*. It was about Hayek's business-cycle theory [...] and not about his moral philosophy[.]

\* David Boaz, at **Cato**, on Metcalf's central thesis that Robert Nozick "disavow[ed] libertarianism":

Shortly before his death in 2002, young writer Julian Sanchez (now a Cato colleague) **interviewed him** and had this exchange:

**JS:** In *The Examined Life*, you reported that you had come to see the libertarian position that you'd advanced in *Anarchy, State and Utopia* as "seriously inadequate." But there are several places in *Invariances* where you

seem to suggest that you consider the view advanced there, broadly speaking, at least, a libertarian one. Would you now, again, self-apply the L-word?

**RN:** Yes. But I never stopped self-applying. What I was really saying in *The Examined Life* was that I was no longer as hardcore a libertarian as I had been before. But the rumors of my deviation (or apostasy!) from libertarianism were much exaggerated. I think this book makes clear the extent to which I still am within the general framework of libertarianism, especially the ethics chapter and its section on the "Core Principle of Ethics."

So Nozick did not "disavow" libertarianism.

\* Conor Friedersdorf, in *The Atlantic*, on Metcalf's notion that libertarianism is equivalent to caring about nothing beyond "naked self-interest":

Let's devise an empirical test to see if this accurately characterizes the ideology. Over at *Reason*, America's leading libertarian magazine, I see that the story atop the Web site asks, "Why is the government doing so little to end sexual assault in prisons?" It's part of their July issue, dedicated to the criminal justice system, which it labels America's "national disgrace." On *Reason's* June cover is Sen. Rand Paul, who has recently tried to end America's war in Libya and to add civil liberties protections to the Patriot Act. The magazine's May cover story is about teachers' unions as an impediment to reform of public schools.

Over at the Institute for Justice, a libertarian public interest law firm, recent cases have been fought on behalf of DC tour guides, Florida interior designers, Louisiana casket makers, Nashville limo drivers, and Utah hair braiders keen on practicing their chosen professions without having to obtain a professional license. I fail to see how IJ lawyers or their libertarian donors benefit personally from lowering barriers to entry for far flung, mostly working class clients.

Meanwhile at the Cato Institute, David Boaz is trying to end the war on drugs, my friend Julian Sanchez is paid to explain how the federal government is using its power in the war on terrorism to expand the surveillance state, and his colleague Gene Healy is a critic of executive overreach and editor of a 2004 book on the federal government's over-criminalization of American life. [...]

[Y]ou're just misinformed if you think that libertarians as a whole care for nothing more than their self-interest. Countless libertarians are working to advance the freedom and fair-treatment of people other than themselves. Often they do so more consistently than some of the liberals who sneer at them.

(Copious links not included in the above excerpt for reasons of time.)

\* E.D. Kain, in the [League of Ordinary Gentleman](#) (from which I harvested some of the above links):

I fear it represents a great deal of confirmation bias on the left. A lot of liberals who see all libertarians as less-lovable Ron Swansons nod along with Metcalf as he makes one clichéd assertion after another and the end result is a bunch of readers happily cheering a piece that makes no attempt at all to treat its subject with any sort of seriousness or grace. It affirms deeply held opinions and distrust, and helps cement the language barrier between liberals and libertarians in ultimately a very destructive and unfortunate way.