



Misconceptions of Paleolibertarianism

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The libertarian movement, although only formalized under this name for about a century, has an extensive history, interspersed with many coalitions, deviations, subgroups, alterations, and developments. Many of these, from the Old Right coalition to the break with the neoconservatives and alliance with the New Left, to the paleo movement (with many more in between) deserve attention from today's libertarians.

A recent article on this site, "Paleolibertarians Are Not Libertarians" has brought this last group into recent discussion, making an explanation and defense of this faction timely.

Who Were The Paleolibertarians?

Before the internet and social media, political alliances were far more valuable than they are today. Running a barely-known magazine or newsletter was expensive, and working together to grow a shared audience devoted to common ground issues was one way to spread ideas and get things moving. Nowadays, anyone with an internet connection can start a blog for free. Alliances are still valuable, but less necessary to spread ideas.

The 1980s featured the Koch/Rothbard split that is still noticeable today in the divide between libertarian organizations like the Cato Institute and the Mises Institute. The former embraced alliances with the mainstream right, while the latter strongly opposed it.

Then came the rise of the paleoconservative movement, with its defiance of the neoconservative establishment, criticism of the welfare-warfare state, and call to embrace the Old Right (the pre-neocon right from which the formal libertarian movement originated). Distanced from the more establishment libertarian movement, Murray Rothbard ("Mr. Libertarian") and Lew Rockwell saw this not only as a potential alliance, but as something important for libertarianism as well as conservatism.

Paleolibertarianism (separate from yet allied with paleoconservatism) was summarized by Rockwell in ten positions:

- I. The leviathan State as the institutional source of evil throughout history.
- II. The unhampered free market as a moral and practical imperative.
- III. Private property as an economic and moral necessity for a free society.

- IV. The garrison State as a preeminent threat to liberty and social well-being.
- V. The welfare State as organized theft that victimizes producers and eventually even its “clients.”
- VI. Civil liberties based on property rights as essential to a just society.
- VII. The egalitarian ethic as morally reprehensible and destructive of private property and social authority.
- VII. Social authority, as embodied in the family, church, community, and other intermediating institutions, as helping protect the individual from the State and as necessary for a free and virtuous society.
- IX. Western culture as eminently worthy of preservation and defense.
- X. Objective standards of morality, especially as found in the Judeo-Christian tradition, as essential to the free and civilized social order.

Rockwell comments that the first six positions are libertarian, but the latter four are neither libertarian nor unlibertarian. The first six describe libertarianism, but the latter four are outside its scope as a political philosophy, but were tacitly accepted by the Old Right libertarians.

In summary, paleolibertarianism saw freedom as “necessary but not sufficient.” As Lord Acton said, “liberty is the highest political end of man” but politics clearly isn’t everything. Rothbard, Rockwell, and others saw an unfortunate tendency for many libertarians to be either apathetic to any and all cultural issues, or actively hostile to social norms.

The alliance between both paleo groups fell apart after Rothbard’s death, with varying testimony on exactly why this was. One common claim was that a goal of the paleo coalition was to have the paleocons learn economics and the paleolibers learn about cultural issues. This worked with some individuals, but failed with others. Contrary to outside accusations, the paleolibertarians never softened on the economic issues and were very critical of protectionism, and the disagreements were too much to maintain an alliance.

“Paleolibertarians Are Not Libertarians”: A Critique

Now that a brief summary of paleolibertarian has been stated, a defense can be made. Although the “X are not real libertarians” accusation sounds overused, it can be a necessary criticism, but only if accurate. The above assertion is, using any meaningful definitions, tremendously inaccurate.

The article by Mr. Bagwell claims that paleolibertarianism is libertarian to the extent that it has economic roots in Austrian economics and anarcho-capitalism, but “other than economic crossover... that is where the similarities... end.” Unfortunately, the article does not provide a definition of libertarianism as a baseline of comparison. There are many different strains of thought among self-identified libertarians, and there is a certain amount of leeway available, given that nearly every libertarian is anti-state, but most libertarians are not anarchists.

If there is one viable definition that most self-described libertarians would agree with, it would be “a belief in property rights and the immorality of the initiation of force.” All libertarians,

whether classical liberals or anarchists, left-libertarians or right-libertarians, utilitarians or natural rights libertarians, fit this definition.

The faulty claims made in the article (followed by responses) are as follows:

“Paleolibertarians’ views on the state, in general, are very nationalistic and right-wing that border fascism. They place heavy emphasis on nationalism and closed borders keeping their Austrian economic system contained within their nation-state.”

An issue with this claim is that it doesn’t attempt to distinguish variants of nationalism. It might seem pointless to insist on definitions, but a [Google search](#) reveals two *very* different definitions. The Brexit campaign was largely a nationalist movement as well as an anti-statist (anti-European Union) movement. Of the paleolibertarians that could be considered “nationalist,” it is clearly a support for the smaller, more accountable unit against the larger, more powerful unit. The “bordering fascism” claim can be safely dismissed as contrary to the previous description of paleolibertarian views as “anarcho-capitalist/Austrian.” As for closed borders, the paleolibertarian view is that borders should be privatized, not closed. The only debate is about what the state should do until it is abolished.

“They also place heavy emphasis on racial and cultural identity particularly with many arguing that right-libertarian economics only works among whites of European descent and that European and North American states should be kept largely or exclusively white (European).”

The mention of heavy emphasis on “cultural identity” implies this is contrary to libertarianism, but the reason why is never stated. The comments on racial identity are also strange, since the argument for racial identity provided as an example was used to defend libertarianism. Whether that is right or wrong is another question entirely. But to make an argument for libertarianism (no matter how faulty it may be) is not contrary to libertarianism. Whether one looks at the Mises Institute or Hoppe’s [Property and Freedom Society](#), one will not find a single person arguing for the state to enforce any kind of racial bias. In fact, my previous Misconceptions article (as someone who could be described as paleolibertarian) [criticized an advocate of racial identity](#).

“Paleolibertarians defer to state enforcement of migration, which is the restriction of the freedom of movement. They also defer to state enforcement of cultural norms and to an extent religious standards. Paleolibertarian cultural standards are greatly influenced by Protestant Christian theology.”

These are all senseless assertions with no evidence. Paleolibertarians are actually uniquely critical of state enforcement of migration. They criticize the state subsidizing migration through publicly-owned land and infrastructure. The clear libertarian position is not open borders or closed borders, but *private* borders. The disagreement lies in what to do in the meantime.

It is unsurprising that the second statement is not backed by examples, as none exist.

The third statement is refuted by [Rothbard’s *The Progressive Era*](#), which describes the Old Right as largely orthodox Christians. And there is a noticeable Catholic prevalence among paleolibertarians. Lew Rockwell is a Catholic and Rothbard, although not religious, was said to be fond of Catholicism.

The article ends with a call for libertarians to denounce paleolibertarians, instead of working with them on points of agreement. I await Mr. Bagwell’s denouncement of myself, as well as his

denouncement of Murray Rothbard, Lew Rockwell, and other paleolibertarians like the great Justin Raimondo, Founding Editor of Antiwar.com, for their “corruption” of the liberty movement.