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[Michael Strong](#)

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John Mackey as a Hero of Intellectual Integrity

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The most annoying aspect of the partisan lynch mob of John Mackey is the claim that he is a "heartless CEO" or, in the words of the Facebook "Boycott Whole Foods" page,

John Mackey, CEO and co-founder of Whole Foods wrote an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal on 8/12/09 quoting Margaret Thatcher and suggesting that healthcare is a commodity that only the rich, like him, deserve . . . Whole Foods has the right to cheat and lie and be as hateful and selfish as the wanna be.

Other than the fact that John wrote an op-ed on 8/12/09 in which he quotes Thatcher, the rest of this is pure nonsense, pure lynch mob rhetoric.

Of course people are free to shop for groceries wherever they want. Why can't some people understand that some of us believe that we should be just as free to shop for education, health care, and insurance as we are for food? Why does this make us "hateful and selfish"? Why not just say, "I disagree and therefore I will no longer shop at Whole Foods?"

Our instincts to support those in our tribal coalition, and punish those outside of it, are just as primitive as are our predilection to eat too much fat and sugar, or the male appetite for female visual stimuli. But today we do not believe it is honorable to over-indulge in fat and sugar, nor for men to ogle women, nor for whites to lynch blacks. How can those who stand for "The Audacity of Hope" believe that they are being honorable when describe Mackey as "hateful and selfish"?

It is worth pointing out at this point that John and I co-founded a non-profit five years ago, [Freedom Lights Our World \(FLOW\) Inc.](#), which promotes entrepreneurial solutions to world problems. We recently published a book, along with several co-authors, titled [Be the Solution: How Entrepreneurs and Conscious Capitalists Can Solve All the World's Problems](#). John and I have worked closely to re-interpret libertarian ideas so that they are based on love and generosity rather than hate and selfishness. Brink Lindsey, the VP of the Cato Institute, rightly describes us as "bleeding-heart libertarians." Often conservatives and libertarians do not feel comfortable with our views precisely because we promote love and generosity. As [one such reviewer wrote](#), "Some conservatives won't like the touchy-feely aspects of the book, just as most lefties won't like the idea of social entrepreneurship replacing bureaucratic elitism as the means of solving human problems."

John and I started FLOW because we remain idealistic do-gooders who are committed to making the world a better place. We are convinced, intellectually and experientially, that entrepreneurs and markets are the most effective means of making the world a better place. You may disagree, but it is false to claim that we are "hateful and selfish." (Among the ideas mentioned in the book, by the way, is that of a "Citizen's Dividend," where each citizen would receive a check from the government which could, of course, go to pay for health care if they so chose).

And, yes, the influence of John's money has corrupted me - on my own I am more libertarian than is John, and I more quickly become angry at the damage the anti-capitalists have caused humanity. As someone who knows him well, I can say that, while he is not perfect, John is certainly loving and generous. The anonymous postings on Yahoo were foolish for someone in his position, but they were entirely harmless, boyish arguing, which John loves to do. If anyone out there believes that anonymous postings on Yahoo can affect stock prices, then I'd be happy to sell you an affordable service that will make all of your

stock prices go up . . .

When I was a socialist believer, I too found it hard to imagine that decent human beings could support free markets. I went to graduate school at the University of Chicago in order to discover how the Chicago economists, who claimed to be scientists, could believe in something so self-evidently evil. And, upon learning economics at Chicago, I gradually discovered that common academic perspectives on capitalism were empirically false.

It was, for instance, distressing to find that, contrary to the history of the 19th century taught in every history, literature, and sociology class, it was not true that under laissez-faire capitalism "the rich got richer and the poor got poorer." Economic historians had shown that the standard of living of the British working class improved from the 1830s, before workplace legislation. The entire socialist worldview had been based on the notion that under laissez-faire capitalism "the rich got richer and the poor got poorer." It was false, and none of them admitted it.

Once my trust in the mainstream intellectual establishment was broken, I became depressed for two years as I re-evaluated the entire mainstream left-liberal worldview. This was in 1987, when many still believed that communism was morally superior to capitalism. Even Paul Samuelson, the Nobel laureate economist whose textbooks educated generations, stated in his 1989 edition "the Soviet economy is proof that, contrary to what many skeptics had earlier believed, a socialist command economy can function and even thrive." So it is with some satisfaction that I can say that by 1989 I was a libertarian.

John became libertarian in the early 1980s. His constituency then, as now, was primarily left. It would have been safer and wiser for him to remain on the left. But unlike many business people, John reads a great deal and takes ideas seriously (he had been a philosophy major before he dropped out to start Whole Foods). For those who take ideas seriously, if we find an argument compelling then we must also stand up for it, even when it is unpopular.

My favorite example of this is Anne Wortham, a black woman who went to Africa in the Peace Corp in the early 1960s as a young idealist and who happened to read Ayn Rand there. She found Rand's ideas compelling and became so committed to libertarian principles that she supported those segregationists who relied on property rights justifications. She had become convinced that property rights included the right to discriminate on private property.

Anyone who knows anything about U.S. history in the 1960s knows that this was an unpopular position for a white person to take - but for a black woman? To compound her troubles, she pursued an academic career in sociology. Sociology is the most leftist of all the academic disciplines; it was (and is) the worst department of all for anyone who is pro-market, less alone a black Randian libertarian woman.

Suffice it to say that in academia Wortham experienced more bigotry for her ideas than she did for her skin color. Eventually she found some open-minded sociologists and influenced them to be more courageous about their pro-market beliefs. She had a significant, unrecognized impact on history when, for instance, she was living with her mentor the sociologist Peter Berger and his wife, arguing with them every day, while he was writing *The Capitalist Revolution: Fifty Propositions about Prosperity, Equality and Liberty*. This book is rightly regarded by the *Times Literary Supplement* as one of the "100 Most Influential Books Since the War" and Wortham's own convictions no doubt made Berger more courageous than he otherwise would have been. Wortham is a hero of intellectual integrity.

Finally, consider Mises, Hayek, Friedman, and Rand, who were advocates for capitalism in the 1940s when all the libertarian intellectuals fit in a phone booth. Mises is the Copernicus, Hayek the Bruno, and [Friedman the Galileo](#) of the most important intellectual revolution since Galileo. They are heroes of intellectual integrity as great as were Copernicus, Bruno, and Galileo (as is Rand, but she is sui generis).

John is also a hero of intellectual integrity. He did not achieve the intellectual discoveries of Mises, Hayek, Friedman, and Rand. Although he may be persecuted, he will not be persecuted as severely as Ann Wortham. But he has followed his convictions when it would have been easier not to. Even those who disagree with John ought to respect his courage and intellectual integrity.

As we observe the lynch mob in action, and some of us try to restrain them, we should realize that progress has always been due to those who resist the mob. Simply because this mob claims to be "progressive" doesn't imply that their actions support progress. Indeed, until they acknowledge that most advances in human happiness and well being are due to creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship, and that freedom is sine qua non for releasing "The Creative Powers of a Free Civilization," billions of people will suffer unnecessarily.

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