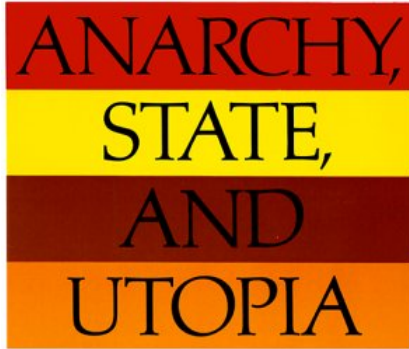


# Attacking Libertarianism

Posted on [June 23, 2011](#) by [Clark Ruper](#)



Robert Nozick

Over the past few days the libertarian and progressive internet communities have been in a tizzy over a recent [Slate](#) article by Stephen Metcalf on [The Liberty Scam](#), *Why even Robert Nozick, the philosophical father of libertarianism, gave up on the movement he inspired.*

This post is not a rebuttal to Metcalf's article or a defense of Nozick. Those have already been well stated by [David Boaz](#), [Aaron Powell](#), and [Jason Kuznicki](#) at Cato, Will Wilkinson at [The Economist](#), [Professor Steven Horwitz](#) at Coordination Problem, and summed up by [Matt Welch at Reason](#) to name a few. This article has been fished more thoroughly than anything I have seen on the internet in a while.

Essentially, Metcalf's article is a snide explanation as to why Robert Nozick's work is important for the libertarian philosophy and movement, examines and critiques a few of his arguments, and attempts to refute libertarianism on the basis that Nozick later changed his mind ([not true](#)). It is much less a fair treatment of Nozick (it is full of factual inaccuracies and stereotypes, see the links above) and more an attempt to get progressives rilled up about fighting against libertarians.

As far as I can tell from reading various historical sources, Metcalf's description of the importance of Robert Nozick and *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* is correct. His publication of that work was a game changer, a Harvard philosopher authoring a robust defense of libertarianism and individual rights. It helped change the general perception of

libertarianism from that of a fringe movement to a political philosophy that deserved serious attention. The modern libertarian movement would not be where it is today without him and his work.

To me, the important takeaway from the article is growing trend from progressive-leaning media outlets, attacking libertarianism as conservatism. **This is a good thing!** It is significant because the standard strategy from the left has been to either ignore the philosophy of liberty or to discredit it by lumping it in with conservatism. Libertarians on most college campuses have likely heard an argument similar to “conservatives are wrong, and libertarians are just more extreme conservatives, ergo libertarianism must be wrong”. While this argument is both factually incorrect and intellectually dishonest, it is still something we libertarians have to work to overcome on a daily basis.

This is why I see articles like Metcalf’s as a positive for libertarians. It means that some progressives are treating libertarianism as a distinct philosophy that they need to address. It is a continuation of the trend that Nozick boosted in the 70s. Due to the work of countless advocates, organizations, academics, and activists, the ideas of liberty are seen as a viable threat to the status quo.

At Students For Liberty this has always been one of our core goals, to promote the ideas of liberty in a way that positions them as a viable alternative to the orthodoxy of the intellectual and public debates. We treat liberty as its own entity, not philosophically or strategically tied to any other ideology. Metcalf’s article and [others like](#) it is proof that our strategy is working. Both the progressive and conservative establishment now see libertarianism as a threat. As the ranks of libertarians grow and our ideas continue to gain acceptance I would expect to see many more of these types of attacks in the months and years to come. Again, this is a good thing.