

Discussion

Reply to Leland B. Yeager

Rhetorical Incorrectness?

James Arnt Aune

One of the dismaying current features of life in academe is the intense polarization of faculty along political and methodological lines. And, I confess, members of the academic Left generally do a dreadful job of including conservative or libertarian or classical liberal points of view in their journals. I am thus grateful to Chris Matthew Sciabarra for graciously allowing me to respond to Leland B. Yeager's (2001) review of my book, *Selling the Free Market: The Rhetoric of Economic Correctness* (Aune 2001), just as I was especially grateful to Deirdre McCloskey both for a thoughtful reading of the first draft of my book manuscript and for the blurb on the book jacket. (McCloskey's comments weren't "heavily edited," as Yeager insinuates.) So, I am glad to have the opportunity to discuss my work in this context.

A word first on my own political commitments. I usually call myself an old-fashioned socialist or social democrat. Two of my political heroes of the last fifty years are Senator Henry Jackson and union leader Albert Shanker, both of whom were devoted to the labor movement and a strong welfare state. They were both strongly anti-Communist and pro-American. For that reason, I am equally as uncomfortable with radical libertarians as I am with academic Marxists. Both appear to me to share the unfortunate desire to remake the world along the lines of a rational plan while neglecting the "friction" that cultural norms and human nature introduce into the unfettered market or the unfettered long march to the classless society. As I thought I had made clear in my book, I have no quarrel with a market economy—as long as it's not turned into a religion. In

the radical libertarian mind, Disraeli, John Maynard Keynes, FDR, and the AFL-CIO are “socialists,” so if they’re all part of the “anti-capitalistic mentality,” then sign me up.

I also am enthusiastic about the United States as a haven of liberty and equal opportunity. I wish I had foregrounded more in my book the curious convergence between the sheer hatred of the United States manifested both by the far left (Noam Chomsky, Edward Said) and by radical libertarians such as Justin Raimondo, Lew Rockwell, and others at Auburn’s Mises Institute. (Rockwell had the audacity to refer to me as a “Commie” on his website.) This hatred and scorn of a stable, prosperous society built on government regulation, the right of labor to organize, and civil liberties simply mystifies me. Both extremes do share an astonishing lack of a sense of humor, which brings me to Yeager’s first charge against my work.

He accuses me of low blows and name-calling. I honestly was trying to be humorous rather than vituperative in the spirit of, say, Engels’s *Anti-Dühring* or, well, Murray Rothbard, who appears not to have been able to get along with anyone—fellow libertarians included. I was trying to address a general audience of traditional conservatives, moderates, and liberals and, in the hope of fulfilling the three Ciceronian offices of rhetoric (*docere, delectare, movere*), I was hoping to instruct by entertaining and then moving my audience. I perhaps erred by not being more dispassionate.

A second charge begins the essay, where Yeager accuses me of labeling “rhetorical tricks.” Therein lies a major misunderstanding. I don’t view rhetorical strategies as “tricks.” Everyone uses them. As the Sophists, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and the great contemporary southern conservative Richard Weaver taught, human uses of language are inevitably “sermonic”; they invite us to take a stand, and they frame the world in strategic ways. My goal in labeling radical libertarian arguments was to help people unfamiliar with them—or, worse, mystified by their pretensions to science—to be able to evaluate those arguments on their own terms. I made the decision to write this response to Yeager in a particular way—the response reflects my “strategy,” but that is not the same as a deceitful “trick.”

I had hoped to spend more time on the particulars of my

arguments, but Yeager mostly summarizes them, without addressing them directly. (He’s right, of course, about my errors about Rothbard’s dissertation advisor and the location of the Mont Pelerin society meeting, but I confess that, as a non-economist poaching on the territory of economic theory, if those were my worst errors I’m rather pleased with myself.) Oddly, Yeager does not argue with my analyses of the minimum wage, unions, or farm crisis, other than to say they are “short.” Those analyses were intended to illustrate the fact that otherwise intelligent economists such as McCloskey, Friedman, and Posner often present economic arguments as if they were settled scientific facts, without engaging in empirical research or addressing counter-arguments. You cannot “prove” that minimum wages cause unemployment by drawing a supply-demand curve, and yet the curve is virtually the whole argument presented by many economists.

Finally, I do believe that Yeager is right that I should have addressed Milton Friedman’s case for capitalism or perhaps Hayek’s, both of which are more nuanced than the folks I do examine in the book. But Hayek at least acknowledged the need for a common morality underpinning the market (unlike the more radical forms of Austrian subjectivism). He defended an “extensive system of social services” so long as they did not make competition ineffective (Hayek 1944, 36–37). And he even saw a distinct role for labor unions in a free society (Hayek 1960, 276). My target is the growing influence of the radical libertarians—*anarchists, really*—who see no need for the state at all. And the most unfortunate thing is that such folks get heard precisely when their arguments coincide with the needs of some (not all) large corporations, as with the current quest to privatize Social Security via Cato Institute position papers—although not, of course, when the issue of corporate welfare is on the agenda.

What I *had* hoped for in *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* was an engagement with my critique of Rand. I am curious what Rand scholars think about my claims that Rand enthusiasts appear mired at an adolescent stage of psychological development, that her style is peculiarly authoritarian, that she has nothing to say to those of us who have children or who are handicapped in some way, and that the

particulars of her private life call into question the validity of her moral philosophy.

It is difficult to communicate across sharp boundaries of ideology. But Yeager and I do in fact share a commitment to liberty. I happen to believe that liberty is more likely to be preserved by a somewhat stronger state than is popular in Auburn, Alabama. I wish he had had a better experience reading my book, but I hereby offer to buy him dinner or coffee the next time he's at Texas A&M or I am in Auburn to compensate him in part for the opportunity costs incurred by reviewing my book.

References

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