

BOOK REVIEWS

Breaking the Marxist Mold: A Review of *Libertarian Literary and Media Criticism: Essays in Memory of Paul A. Cantor*

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Libertarian Literary and Media Criticism: Essays in Memory of Paul A. Cantor

Jo Ann Cavallo, ed.

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In the admittedly small universe of libertarian literary and media criticism, the late Paul Cantor (1945–2022) remains undoubtedly the preeminent figure. A longtime professor of literature at the University of Virginia (UVA) in Charlottesville, Cantor distinguished himself both with his knowledge of politics and Austrian economics—as a teenager, he had attended Ludwig von Mises’s at-home seminars in New York—and with his ability to communicate scholarly insights on a popular level. He managed to get along with a broad spectrum of right-of-center personalities and was equally at home lecturing on Shakespeare and politics at Harvard with the sponsorship of Bill Kristol as he was speaking at Mises Institute events.

Cantor was unfailingly generous with his time to students and colleagues, a generosity I experienced firsthand. While still a graduate student in the humanities, I met him at the Mises Institute, where he was speaking about his just-released *Gilligan Unbound*, a series of reflections on some of the most popular television series of the twentieth century. Upon hearing that a humanities student was attending the event, he sought me out and sat with me at lunch, where he confessed to me that his real purpose in publishing *Gilligan Unbound* was to write the chapter on *The X-Files*; the book’s chapters on the other shows were the price his publisher made him pay for



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that indulgence. Years later, after I had become the director of a doctoral program in the humanities, I visited Cantor at UVA, and he graciously agreed to serve on dissertation committees of students in our literature track.

Having benefited from Cantor's scholarship and kindness over the years, I was pleased to see this volume of essays published in his memory. It contains contributions from a number of distinguished scholars across several disciplines, including philosophy, literature, economics, and business. In its introduction, editor Jo Ann Cavallo (Columbia University) writes of Cantor's Austro-libertarian analytic approach in striking terms: "Not since the appearance of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 has a new literary approach invited us to read texts from a vantage point that jolts us into recognition of deep-seated ideological undercurrents that had previously remained unnoticed, or simply passed over in silence" (3). Cantor's critique is even more fundamental than Said's, she writes, for it "offers a more sweeping analysis of political power structures, aimed at understanding literature and society in any time period and at any point on the globe," in contrast to Said's focus on colonialism and "the Orient" more specifically (3).

As Cavallo notes in the introduction, the first three essays in this volume seek to expand the Austro-libertarian methodology of literary criticism in different ways. In "Paul Cantor on Shakespeare's Rome," philosopher David Gordon (Mises Institute) discusses Cantor's embrace of Shakespeare as a first-rate political thinker who took philosophy seriously. The late Stephen Cox (University of California San Diego) blends the theory of marginal utility with influential theories of the comic impulse to produce an "intimidation theory of comedy" in "Why Do You Think That's Funny? The Theory of Comedy and the Theory of Valuation." Finally, Katharine Gillespie (Chapman University), confounding feminist anticapitalist narratives, provides a case study of an influential seventeenth-century female moneylender in "'A Perfect Ambodexter': The Roaring Girl and Commercial Self-Fashioning."

Although the shortest of the three chapters, Gordon's essay stands out both for its treatment of Cantor's Straussian take on Shakespeare and for its long quotations from private correspondence between Cantor and Gordon. In one noteworthy passage, Cantor, following philosopher Leo Strauss, writes to Gordon of the sharp distinction between ancient and modern thinking about the nature and purpose of political regimes:

Today we say: it is natural for human beings to indulge their desires. Aristotle and Shakespeare would say: it is natural for human beings to restrain their desires. Plato vs. Freud. Modern view: you are most a human being when you give way to your desires; then you are "expressing" your true self. Ancient view: you are most a human being when you restrain your desires. And you have to be trained to do that; it's a matter of habit

(Aristotle). And the regime is what trains you to restrain your desires. In that it is NOT interfering with your fulfillment as a human being; it is making that fulfillment possible. (21)

As the above quote makes clear, Cantor classifies Shakespeare as having an “ancient” understanding, which is manifested in his Roman plays. Whereas the Roman Republic cultivated aristocratic “spiritedness” and civic virtue, the Roman Empire encouraged a proletarian eros by removing the rewards and meaningfulness of public life. Cantor thus interprets Shakespeare’s Roman plays, from *Coriolanus* to *Antony and Cleopatra*, as presenting an overarching narrative of decline. Cantor’s libertarian side shows when he attributes this decline in the Roman character in large part to the imperialistic policy followed during the later centuries of the Republic.

The next group of chapters presents Austro-libertarian analyses of five canonical works. Peter Hufnagel (Miller School of Albemarle) argues in “The Alchemy of the Free Market in Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist*” that the playwright displays a more positive attitude toward the market than previous scholarship has recognized. In “*War and Peace* as an Important Contribution to Economics and Methodological Individualism,” Edward Stringham (Trinity College) and Spencer Brown argue that Leo Tolstoy rejects both the “Great Man” and “impersonal social forces” theories of history in favor of an outlook viewing historical events as explicable only in terms of individuals, a sort of precursor to the marginal revolution in economics. In “A Wooden Boy and a Lesson in Free Market Economics: How Pinocchio Becomes an Entrepreneur,” Salvatore Taibi (Rutgers University) asserts that Carlo Collodi’s serialized novel is in part a meditation on the distinction between the older *gemeinschaft* (communal society) and the rising *gesellschaft* (associative society) during the nineteenth century, and that Pinocchio must engage economically and entrepreneurially with others in order to succeed. Michael Valdez Moses (Chapman University) argues in “‘This Moral Monster State’: Modern Utopianism, Emergent Order, and H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds*” that a tension between “ecological” and “constructivist” rationality in Wells’s writing contributes to its imaginative success but ultimately renders its social philosophy incoherent. Finally, in “The Nearly Invisible Hand: An Austrian Approach to Teaching Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*,” Jo Ann Skousen (Chapman University) makes the case that “the novel can reveal a virtual primer in Austrian economics” by demonstrating the consistency between the ethics of the marketplace and those that lead to the experiences sought by Hesse’s protagonist (158). By and large, these chapters interpret their respective works in ways that are intuitive, even obvious, to any reader who is familiar with both the works themselves and Austro-libertarian theory. That they draw conclusions so at odds with existing literary scholarship highlights the ideological monoculture that has dominated the field for so long.

In keeping with Paul Cantor's own interests, the remaining essays in the volume analyze various icons of popular culture. In "Scrooge McDuck: Caricature or Manifesto of the American Capitalist?," Alberto Mingardi (University of Milan) examines the decades-long evolution of one of Disney's most famous characters and his use as a vehicle for various ideological portrayals. Stefano Adamo (University of Banja Luka) offers a critical examination of the narrative depictions of Wall Street financiers in "The Big Screen Takes on the Financial Crisis: An Exploration of Four Films (2011–2015)." Husband and wife coauthors Matthew McCaffrey (University of Manchester) and Carmen-Elena Dorobăț (Manchester Metropolitan University) survey the ways various science fiction series confront topics such as scarcity, the division of labor, trade, war, and government failure in "First Principles on the Final Frontier: Economic Foundations of Science Fiction Television." In "The Big Sky on the Small Screen: Austrian Economics in the *Yellowstone* Universe," Andrew Spivey (Arizona Christian University) discusses the different ways the three related television series *Yellowstone*, *1883*, and *1923* depict characters' adaptation to changing market conditions, engagement in subjective valuations, and reactions to governmental regulation and taxation.

The final essay, "*Undercover Boss*: Do We Need a Kinder, Gentler Capitalism?," by Cantor himself, is one of the highlights of the volume. It contrasts the premise of the television show *Undercover Boss*, in which the impersonal nature of market relations is seen as a defect needing a semifeudal, personal connection between boss and employee to rectify it, with that of *Shark Tank*, in which capitalism is presumed to "work," requiring competent executions of sound business plans for success, regardless of any relationships among employees or customers. Cantor portrays *Undercover Boss* as partaking in the properties of comedy with its temporary inversion of corporate hierarchy, only to restore it at the conclusion of each episode. He also argues that it teaches effective lessons about the value of the division of labor. Ultimately, the show provides a positive portrayal of capitalism, but it does so, at least partially, for the wrong reasons; the calling into question of the impersonal nature of large-scale organizations undercuts a key characteristic that makes them successful in providing for human needs in the market.

Libertarian Literary and Media Criticism is a welcome addition to a field long starved for alternatives to Marxist approaches. Although many of the contributors are not literary scholars per se, they competently provide relevant insights into the connections between significant works of canonical literature and popular culture on the one hand, and Austrian economics and libertarianism on the other. It is heartening to see that Paul Cantor's scholarship has continued to inspire and inform scholars across disciplinary

boundaries and attract them to literary and media criticism. It is to be hoped that this volume will help inaugurate a new trend of market-friendly analysis in this area.

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