
 Review

 Regrounding the Literary
 Humanities

*Libertarian Literary and
 Media Criticism: Essays in
 Memory of Paul A. Cantor,*
 Jo Ann Cavallo, ed.

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Titling this remarkable and quixotic collection of essays must have been difficult. “Capitalist Literary and Media Criticism” might have been technically more accurate, since the book really doesn’t touch the major issues of governance and political economy in the dyed-in-the-wool libertarian tradition, but rather tends to defend classical versions of the liberal republic and legal government by consent. And “Capitalist” is a term of execration for not only progressives but many liberals, so using it in the title might well brand the book as yet another academic attack on the free market system. “Liberal Literary...” might be similarly true, but misleading. Maybe “Free Market Literary and Media Criticism” would have been less hackle-raising—but perhaps the book should be raising some hackles.

The book is most deeply about markets in literature and media, and the essential role of economic exchange as the flesh and blood of our greatest (and most popular) fictions. It is quixotic, but not in the now-shopworn protest tradition. It is quixotic in its commonsense, good humor, and adherence to sound economic principles common to economists across the ideological spectrum. It well represents the insight and fairmindedness of its dedicatee Paul Cantor, who has a rousing essay at the end, one of his last pieces of writing. Its lack of the hostile jargon and apocalyptic political atmosphere common to the Modern Language Association and its peers in the Humanities is very refreshing.

What it does is essentially to take the strategy of the postmodern turn—to analyse all literature and art in Marxian terms of economic injustice and oppression, and replace the Marxian narrative with the one that actually works, that is, the regulated free-market system that has in the last few decades rescued from poverty more than half the world. Many of the great stories take on renewed life—Shakespeare’s plays, especially, but also Jonson’s *Alchemist*, Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, *Pinocchio*, H. G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds* (which gets a rather sinister undertone of the Technostate), and even, with astonishing effrontery, Hesse’s *Siddhartha*. Likewise, pop culture gets rousing re-readings (entirely in Cantor’s own genial tone of full enjoyment and gentle debunking of contemporary attitudes). Scrooge McDuck finally gets a historiography and a serious critique, showing his evolution in relation to the economic understandings of postwar America. The financial crisis spawned several important movies, all deeply warped by the struggle between different narratives, Marxian, mainline economic, and morally traditional. An essay compares them. *Yellowstone* gets a deeply insightful analysis in

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the terms of Austrian economics. Science fiction remains a relatively wild intellectual frontier and there is a strong essay looking at contemporary screen versions of future economic systems. And there is a very amusing piece proposing a theory of comedy that goes beyond Bergson's to the idea of surprise pricing.

Cantor's own essay tackles the two most cheerfully capitalist regular series on TV: *Undercover Boss* and *Shark Tank*, and comes to some very surprising conclusions. Cantor has few illusions about *Undercover Boss*'s benevolence, regarding its often heart-rending endings the way Oscar Wilde regarded Dickens' more sentimental moments: it would take a heart of stone not to laugh at the death of Little Nell. But Cantor is very forgiving of its good intentions.

This collection comes at a very important time. It is clear that the Critical Theory movement in the academy, with its full-throated disparagement of the central values of the Humanities—beauty, truth, and goodness and their replacement by social-science narratives of power and economic oppression, is in a state of crisis. It is so both practically, in the draining away of its student base (if your child loves art and literature, don't wreck it by sending her or him to a top university), and by the massive contradictions involved in its race to the bottom for the most disabling explanation of civilization.

Currently there is yet another challenge to the traditions of the humanistic academy: Critical Theory's antinomian and scornful rejection of the status quo has now been joined enthusiastically by a current administration, vocal in its support of the economic underdog, and bent on an even more massive destruction of the humanities. The "new broom" of the current administration is if anything even more hostile to the free market and the mutual creating of value by exchange than the most woke neomaxist. Perhaps they may even join forces, as they are motivated by the same spirit, and both derive from the profound post-modern undermining of the spirit of truth, the same belief in the social construction of reality.

All is not lost. Several fine books on language, the English, Greek, Roman, Indian, Chinese and Japanese classics have been appearing in the chinks or margins of the academy, pretty much devoid of Critical Theoryspeak. Though real scholarship within the academy may be retreating, public interest in it, especially on the internet, is reviving. *Libertarian Literary and Media Criticism* may be the seed of a more liberal and humane movement in literary and humanistic studies. Jo Ann Cavallo deserves our gratitude for gathering together such a band of interesting misfits.