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## Paul Cantor: Model Mentor

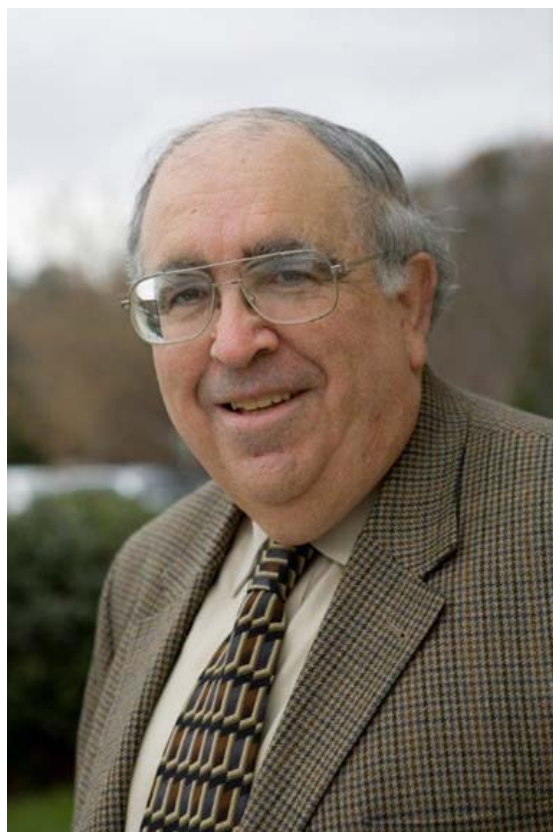

Monday, September 22nd, 2014 by [Allen Mendenhall](#) posted in [Economics](#), [Education](#).

I once called Paul Cantor “the incomparable Cantor.” Another apt, alliterative sobriquet would have been “model mentor.” When others weren’t, Paul was there for me. He helped me. He taught me. He guided me. He’s the type of scholar I’d like to become.

I first met Paul at an Austrian Scholars Conference at the Mises Institute in Auburn, Alabama. He and I had been corresponding for a few years and had spoken over the phone, but we’d never met in person. Quite by accident, I bumped into someone in a tweed jacket shortly after I delivered a Rothbardian paper on the rise of the state in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *The History of the Kings of Britain*. As the man turned around, I could see his name tag – Paul Cantor – and before I could apologize for running into him I had taken Paul’s right hand in mine and was pumping it up and down with enthusiasm. Meeting your hero is generally inadvisable; reality usually doesn’t live up to expectations. Paul was the exception: his charm and humor, I was happy to discover, weren’t limited to the written word. He was a great conversationalist, and I could have listened to him speak for hours.

Paul was educated at Harvard University, where he earned his B.A. in English in 1966 and his Ph.D. in English in 1971. His studies in Austrian economics began while he was a senior in high school in 1961 and 1962, when he attended Ludwig von Mises’s seminars at New York University, an experience that would shape the way he viewed the world and its beautiful, spontaneous complexity. He began teaching at Harvard in 1971 before moving to the University of Virginia in 1977, where he has remained ever since. He is now the Clifton Waller Barrett Professor of English at UVA and recently taught as a Visiting Professor of Government at Harvard.

Paul’s career as a professor and literary critic has been divided between traditional areas of literary study, such as Shakespeare’s plays and English Romanticism, and more innovative areas, such as popular culture, media studies, and Austrian economics and literature. His books in the former area include *Shakespeare’s Rome* (1976), *Creature and Creator* (1985), *Shakespeare: Hamlet* (1989), and *Macbeth und die Evangelisierung von Schottland* (1993), and his

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books in the latter area include *Gilligan Unbound* (2001), *Literature and the Economics of Liberty* (2009) (co-edited with Stephen Cox), and *The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture* (2012). *Literature and the Economics of Liberty* was the first book-length work to integrate the methodologies and principles of Austrian economics with critical analyses of literary texts; it ushered in a new school of literary theory and expanded the reach and influence of Austrian economics to the humanities.

*Literature and the Economics of Liberty* is also the first work of its kind to not only acknowledge the import of non-Marxist economics to literary criticism but also to adopt free-market principles in its economic approach to literary texts. Paul and his coauthors demonstrate that Austrian economics, which, in Paul's words, "focuses on the freedom of the individual actor and the subjectivity of values, is more suited to the study of literature and artistic creativity than a materialist, determinist, and collectivist doctrine such as Marxism." To fully understand the distinction between free-market and Marxist techniques that Paul draws in the book, one must understand the intellectual climate within literature departments and the history of literary theory and criticism in the 20th century. If you were to visit the nearest university library and to scan the tables of contents of any recent anthology of literary theory and criticism, you would find there no schools of economic theory besides Marxism. It isn't that other economic methods of literary theory haven't been tried. They have. But when they've been tried, they've either betrayed an elementary understanding of economics, incorporated Marxist offshoots, or merely dabbled in economic concepts without developing sustained economic analyses. Paul's book, therefore, is groundbreaking.

*The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture* extends and modifies the idea that Paul calls, in *Literature and the Economics of Liberty*, the "poetics of spontaneous order." Examining television and film rather than novels, plays, and poetry, Paul takes to task the governmental entities that have regulated television and film and shows how artistic innovation and creativity have emerged through experimentation and through the complex interactions between producers and consumers. In both *The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture* and *Literature and the Economics of Liberty*, Paul complicates the Romantic trope of the isolated artist whose genius alone, divorced as it supposedly is from ordinary consumers, allows him to create masterpieces that exceed common tastes and standards. Paul proposes that, in fact, commercialism and competition generate creativity and genius rather than stifle it and that common tastes and standards are important signals to artists.

Paul is a funny man. When asked why he dedicated his book *Gilligan Unbound* to his old VCR, he remarked, "Well, some things are not easy to speak about in public. Let's just say that I spent a lot of nights with that VCR, and one thing led to another—some rewinds, a lot of fast forwards, every now and then a pause or two—and let's face it—eventually it just wore out. The VCR, I mean." There are no better ambassadors for liberty than those like Paul who are both lettered and humorous, kind and learned. Even enemies of freedom could not dislike Paul Cantor.

Paul explained in an interview in *The Austrian Economics Newsletter* in 2001 that his "project of looking at literature with capitalist eyes began when I prepared a paper for a 1992 Mises Institute conference, and won the prize for the best paper." He added that he had been considering the relationship between literature and capitalism much earlier than 1992. If it weren't for Paul, there would be no school of Austrian economics and literature. We need more entrepreneurial minds to reveal the value and insights of the Austrian school beyond its typical associations and predictable applications. Not everyone can be a professional economist, but everyone is affected by economics. Paul uses literary texts to articulate the humane aspects of Austrian economics and the enlightening force of free markets. He inspires an interest in Austrian economics among those who ordinarily would not see the necessity for free markets, or who might not recognize a free society or appreciate different perspectives on capitalism, or who have been conditioned by professors to distrust capitalism. Literary theory and criticism have been the province of the left and of the statists, but Paul offers something different, something sounder, something more concerned with the absolute value and dignity of every human person. He is a man to celebrate.

**Allen Mendenhall** is a Mises Canada Emerging Scholar. He is a staff attorney to Chief Justice Roy S. Moore of the Supreme Court of Alabama, an adjunct professor at Faulkner University, and a doctoral candidate in English at Auburn University. His book is *Literature and Liberty: Essays in Libertarian Literary Criticism*. Visit his website at [AllenMendenhall.com](http://AllenMendenhall.com).

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