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The Flourishing of Libertarian Literary Writing



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07/15/2014 • Matthew McCaffrey (<https://mises.org/profile/matthew-mccaffrey>)

Although libertarians and Austrian economists have been interested for a long time in the relationship between art and liberty, there's been relatively little effort to develop a distinctly liberty- or market-oriented form of literary theory; critical theory is a playground for myriad "isms," but libertarianism isn't often counted among them. Fortunately, this situation is beginning to change, as there's a lot of exciting work being done in the field of literary studies, which isn't usually known for its sound economics or liberal political philosophy. Much of the creative energy behind this new research can be attributed to Paul Cantor, who has devoted an impressive career to exploring the relation between markets, art, and popular culture. If you want an overview of the topic, you can listen to Cantor's fascinating lecture series from 2006 on Commerce and Culture (<http://mises.org/media.aspx?action=category&ID=91>). Especially important is the book he edited with Stephen Cox, *Literature and the Economics of Liberty: Spontaneous Order in Culture* (https://mises.org/books/literature_and_liberty_cantor.pdf), which helped lay the foundations of a libertarian literary criticism. There are many other writers who are pushing the boundaries as well, especially those at the Austrian Economics and Literature (<http://theliteraryorder.blogspot.co.uk/>) blog. To name only one contributor, Sarah Skwire frequently covers neglected classics like the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan (http://www.fee.org/the_freeman/detail/the-very-model-of-a-modern-freeman-column), along with unfairly-maligned works like Thoreau's *Walden* (http://www.fee.org/the_freeman/detail/to-read-well-a-noble-exercise). For now though I want to discuss two recent additions to the growing literature. The first is a new book by Allen Mendenhall, *Literature and Liberty: Essays in Libertarian Literary Criticism* (<http://www.amazon.com/Literature-Liberty-Libertarian-Literary-Criticism/dp/0739186337>). The book seeks to expand the work done by Cantor and others in developing a new approach to criticism. Jo Ann Cavallo writes in her review (<http://libertarianpapers.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/article/2014/06/lp-6-1-41.pdf>):

Not since the appearance of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (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 were simply passed over in silence. Yet whereas Said alerted readers to a literary misrepresentation of "the Orient" implicitly supporting European colonialism in the early modern and modern periods, libertarian literary criticism 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.

Power relations are immensely important in literary criticism, and because of its potentially wide scope, a libertarian analysis of power can deliver more insight than many other critical theories. The hope is that if we take economics and libertarian philosophy seriously, we can build a more ambitious approach to literary analysis. Understanding how markets (and states!) really work is a necessary and highly valuable step in interpreting not just literature in the narrow sense, but also the many texts that surround us in everyday life. Sure enough, numerous applications of libertarian critical theory are found in Mendenhall's book, which covers a variety of writings, from Shakespeare's plays to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. However, in addition to academic literary criticism, we also need analysis that speaks directly to practical experience. Critical theory tends to be confined to the academy, making it inaccessible to a large number of people, and what's more, ideas generated in academia are often subject to the influence of gatekeepers (<http://bastiat.mises.org/2014/07/the-intellectuals-hostility-to-the-market-economy/>), who might prevent good ideas from filtering through to the general public. These kinds of problems make Ed Younkins' new book, *Exploring Capitalist Fiction: Business through Literature and Film* (<http://www.amazon.com/Exploring-Capitalist-Fiction-Business-Literature/dp/0739184261>), especially noteworthy. Younkins' book is mainly interested in how business is portrayed in literature and film, and the kind of values pop culture associates with commerce. This approach is important because, as Stephen Cox puts it (<http://libertarianpapers.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/article/2014/07/lp-6-1-51.pdf>), "Younkins... points to the important role of literature in the study and creation of values. Literature tells stories of life, but it also helps people to create their own life stories." It's therefore quite important to see how art depicts business and the market economy, as that depiction will influence our own values and how we express them. To make this point, Younkins covers sources from *Atlas Shrugged* to *Wall Street*, bringing together material as diverse as *The Great Gatsby* and *Glengarry Glenn Ross*. His writing is straightforward and clear, a definite advantage over more conventional literary writing, which is often incomprehensible. These are just a few examples of the kind of work libertarians are doing on the subject, and I'm sure that in the next few years this kind of research will play a large role in spreading sound ideas about markets and the free society. Libertarians should welcome the flourishing of all types of literary writing, especially if we hope to win the hearts and minds of the public at large.

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