

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

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

Edited by Jo Ann Cavallo

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The late Paul A. Cantor (1945–2022) was a unique case among the many students, both formal and informal, of Ludwig von Mises. Cantor began attending Mises's New York seminars as a high schooler, but unlike most of Mises's other students, Cantor's primary passion was English and literature, and rather than going on to become an academic economist or enter the world of business or finance, Cantor would go on to become an English professor. He was especially known for his work on Shakespeare, as well as an appreciation for pop culture and television, utilizing his economic literacy to bring a perspective sorely lacking to a field long dominated by leftists or even outright Marxists.¹

This volume, edited by Jo Ann Cavallo, a professor of Italian at Columbia University, seeks to pay homage to Cantor's life and work of applying the libertarian analysis he pioneered to both highbrow literature and more popular media, such as comics and television. The number of genres and subjects covered by this volume is broad and spans centuries, and any reader is likely to come away provoked to thoughtfulness and contemplation on many interesting questions.

The adjective "libertarian" is used in a broad sense encompassing free market economics, individualism, and generally anti-statist attitudes, and this lens is used in various ways by the different contributors. In her introduction, Cavallo

1 Paul A. Cantor, "A Brief Intellectual Biography," Paul A. Cantor website, accessed May 6, 2026, .

explicitly contrasts this approach with the dominant Marxist approach and draws a comparison to Edward Said's *Orientalism* as a paradigm-shifting perspective toward analyzing literature and media across history in various contexts.

To the extent that the term "libertarian" is affiliated with economics, this approach is very apt. In the words of Mises, "Economics must not be relegated to classrooms and statistical offices and must not be left to esoteric circles. It is the philosophy of human life and action and concerns everybody and everything. It is the pith of civilization and of man's human existence."² It naturally follows that such a fundamental aspect of our humanity will inevitably manifest in various forms of art, literature, and media in general. Unfortunately, aside from a few heroic pioneers, such as Paul Cantor, the contributors to this volume, and people such as Allen Mendenhall, the field has largely been surrendered to Marxists and various other flavors of leftism.

However, "libertarian" also carries connotations beyond merely economics, extending to views of the proper role and form of government, nongovernmental social organization, and the ontological and teleological nature of man himself. Given the, at times, extreme breadth of—and sometimes directly contradictory—perspectives on these issues held by self-identified libertarians, the helpfulness of an explicitly libertarian form of analysis might vary by the practitioner.

Relatedly, another seminar student of Mises, the political theorist Eric Voegelin, warns throughout his work that there is great danger in adherence to ideological or "istic" constructions that are ultimately cut off from the transcendent experiential nature of reality. Marxism is, of course, the poster child of an ideological construction, and this comes across in Marxist literature analysis, where reality in all its complexity must be forced into its narrow and dogmatic framework.³ Libertarians should be careful to ensure that in their worthy quest to supplant Marxist dogmatism, they do not end up substituting yet another limited ideological system that is cut off from the full nature of reality.

2 Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, Scholar's ed. (Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1998), 874.

3 For an accessible introduction to the work of Eric Voegelin, see Michael P. Federici, *Eric Voegelin: The Restoration of Order*, Library of Modern Thinkers (ISI Books, 2002).

Fortunately, this volume is largely free of such dangers, and even in essays where the reader might be provoked to disagreement, the questions that are raised are worthy of contemplation.

While there is not space to address all the contributions here, I will highlight some thoughts that arose from two essays that touch on the rather broad spectrum of views that can be encompassed within libertarianism.

Katherine Gillespie's essay "'A Perfect Ambodexter': The Roaring Girl and Commercial Self-Fashioning" is an example of the wide breadth of libertarian thought when it comes to issues beyond free-market economics. In this essay Gillespie analyzes the fascinating life of one Mary Firth, a cross-dressing, pickpocket, duelist, usurer, and pimp in seventeenth-century England. Gillespie uses Firth's life as an example to counter feminist anti-capitalists who posit that capital and "neoliberalism" are forces that oppress and constrain women.

Far from oppressing women, Gillespie argues that capitalism has rather served as a force of radical women's liberation and that commercial culture has allowed for people, especially women, to "self-fashion" themselves freed from old rules and hierarchies. Her analysis is quite interesting but speaks to the wide range of views encompassed within libertarian thought. No doubt many people would look at the rather dissolute life of Mary Firth and conclude that this degree of freedom and liberation is a negative externality of economic liberalization, rather than a positive. Indeed, this case plays into the hands of more traditionalist critics of capitalism and liberalism who argue that they are social acids that dissolve important social bonds and order.⁴

Edward Stringham and Spencer Brown's contribution "*War and Peace* as an Important Contribution to Economics and Methodological Individualism" uses Tolstoy to argue simultaneously against both the idea of impersonal forces and great man interpretations of history, arguing instead for a Mises-style methodological individualist perspective. However, it is noteworthy that the authors invoke Tolstoy as an early forerunner of Mises-style methodological

4 For contemporary popular criticism in this vein, see Sohrab Ahmari, *The Unbroken Thread: Discovering the Wisdom of Tradition in an Age of Chaos* (Sentinel, 2021), and Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale University Press, 2018).

individualism, seeing how Mises himself was not a fan of Tolstoy, and in fact blamed him, alongside Lenin, as living forces that “cannot produce a lasting social organization” in Russia.⁵

One might also wonder to what extent Mises would agree with the rejection of great man theories of history wholesale. Mises is explicit in his view that “creative geniuses” are not even bound by the apodictic law of human action, and that such people are responsible for human advancement, stating, “Far above the millions that come and pass away tower the pioneers, the men whose deeds and ideas cut out new paths for mankind.”⁶

Mises contrasts the genius with the common man that “does not speculate about the great problems. With regard to them he relies upon other people’s authority, he behaves as ‘every decent fellow must behave,’ he is like a sheep in the herd. It is precisely this intellectual inertia that characterizes a man as a common man.”⁷

While Mises rejects the Carlyle-style great man theory that the authors use Tolstoy to critique, he still seems to believe in the existence of “pioneers” whose actions have a notable effect on the course of humanity who are differentiated from the common man “sheep.” However, such pioneers, in Mises’s telling, are not political in the Carlyle sense, but rather operate through the arts, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

On the surface, Mises and Tolstoy are in agreement in rejecting “impersonal forces of history”; however, one may come away from this essay with the impression that the authors embrace a rather radical sense of freedom, remarking that Tolstoy’s stance “suggests an inherent open-endedness of events as they unfold from the actions of all of the individuals involved,” although this is tempered by the idea that “human reality exists as an interplay of free will and necessity.”⁸

5 Ludwig von Mises, *Liberalism: In the Classical Tradition*, trans. Ralph Raico, 3rd ed. (Cobden Press; Foundation for Economic Education, 1985), 153.

6 Mises, *Human Action*, 138.

7 Mises, *Human Action*, 46.

8 Jo Ann Cavallo, ed., *Libertarian Literary and Media Criticism: Essays in Memory of Paul A. Cantor* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), 94–95.

Yet, the authors then go on to interpret Tolstoy to be saying that “if people had strong personal convictions and stayed true to them, rather than going with the flow of events, war itself could be avoided.”⁹ Such a claim seems open to a utopian interpretation that is in contrast with Mises’s own views on the power of individuals, historical causation, and determinism. One might similarly take away that the authors, or at least their interpretation of Tolstoy, attribute more significance to individual action than Mises would.

For instance, Mises argues that the Great War was “inevitable” given the geopolitical context of the world. His methodological individualism does not prevent him from saying this. He can on the one hand say, “Political, social, and economic affairs are the outcome of the cooperation of all people,” which aligns with Tolstoy, and then turn around and state, “An accident that eliminates the work of an individual, be he even a rather eminent one, diverts the course of events only slightly from the line they would have followed if it had not occurred.” This later view appears to greatly lessen the significance of individual “personal convictions” in being able to abolish war.¹⁰

The purpose of bringing up Mises’s views is not to assert that he is correct and that Tolstoy, Stringham, and Brown are wrong. But this divergence highlights the fact that two ostensibly “libertarian” interpretations are contradictory.

Whatever disagreements individual essays may invite, the volume’s breadth of genres and media forms is to be commended. The field of economically literate media analysis is vast and unharvested. This volume will no doubt serve as a useful template and source of inspiration for those who desire to expand the field.

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9 Cavallo, 97.

10 Interestingly, here in his last book, Mises once again brings up his concept of the genius being different from the rest of humanity, specifically in their irreplaceability, in contrast to the masses. Ludwig von Mises, *The Ultimate Foundation of Economic Science: An Essay on Method* (D. Van Nostrand, 1962), 59–61.