

Austrian Economics and Culture

An Interview With Paul Cantor



AUSTRIAN ECONOMICS NEWSLETTER

Spring 2001 — Volume 21, number 1

THE AUSTRIAN ECONOMICS NEWSLETTER

Spring 2001 — Volume 21, Number 1

Copyright © 2001 by the Ludwig von Mises Institute
518 West Magnolia Avenue, Auburn, Alabama 36832-4528
phone (334) 321-2100; fax (334) 321-2119
email info@mises.org; web www.mises.org

The Austrian Economics Newsletter is published quarterly by the Ludwig von Mises Institute.

AUSTRIAN ECONOMICS AND CULTURE

AEN: Before we get to your work on popular culture, let's examine your literary project.

CANTOR: The 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. But it's something that I had been thinking about for years. I wondered how I could put to use the training I had in Austrian economics within my own area of specialization.

AEN: The union of economics and literary criticism was already well established in your profession?

CANTOR: Yes, in fact there seems to be an automatic identification: if you talk about economics and literature, you *have* to be Marxist. By the mid-1980s, that point of view dominated literary criticism.

By the late 1980s, however, Marxism had been discredited in virtually every other intellectual endeavor. The collapse of real socialism in Eastern Europe was the final blow to the theoretical and practical case for socialism. But here were literary critics who were Marxists and acting as if nothing had happened. It would be like writing on literature and astronomy from a Ptolemaic perspective.

I set out to show that it is possible to talk about literature and economics in ways that are not Marxist. For example, many Marxist critics were showing how literature often supports capitalist ideology. In fact, it seemed to me that many authors were programmatically left-wing and were seeking to debunk the market economy. Shouldn't we take notice of that



PAUL CANTOR

Dr. Cantor studied at Ludwig von Mises's New York seminar before taking his B.A. and Ph.D. at Harvard. He is a professor of English at the University of Virginia, and the author of *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire* (Cornell University Press, 1976), *Creature and Creator: Myth-making and English Romanticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), and, soon to be published, *Gilligan Unbound: Popular Culture in the Age of Globalization* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

He is also the author of articles on literary criticism and economic theory in the *Review of Austrian Economics* and the *Journal of Libertarian Studies*.

Dr. Cantor may be contacted via email at pac2j@virginia.edu. He was interviewed during the February 2001 Mises Institute conference, "Liberty and Public Life."

fact? And what about those writers who understand market economics? We should take notice of their insights too. Hence, I decided to turn the tables on the Left.

AEN: What was your first effort?

CANTOR: It was a reinterpretation of Thomas Mann's "Disorder and Early Sorrow" in light of Misesian monetary theory. The results were quite fruitful. In his

authority and prestige, and the old were denigrated. Instead of saving, housewives struggled to spend as much money as possible. Hyperinflation led to a kind of hyperreality in which nothing has a fixed meaning. Society spun out of control.

This is all very canny on Mann's part. He didn't know Austrian economics or Mises's theory, but as an artist, he had a feel for the cultural consequences of inflation. But critics who are unfamiliar with the literature on inflation might miss his point entirely.

By the way, Mann's story also applies today. Some of the same cultural consequences—the undermining of traditional authority, the subsidizing of youth—are all present. How much of this is due to expansive monetary policy is up to the economist to discover.

AEN: Presumably even the Left should recognize the destructive power of inflation.

CANTOR: And yet it is sometimes difficult to predict their likes and dislikes. Though literary critics are mostly Marxists, they do not even accept Marx's view that the change from feudalism to capitalism was a welcome event dictated by the forces of history. They still tend to romanticize the Middle Ages as some sort of glorious precapitalist utopia.

For example, the critics write essays on Shakespeare that discuss the breakdown of the feudal order as if that is something we

should regret. This is a good indication of how strong the anti-capitalist mentality is. These people will praise anything that isn't capitalism.

I wrote an essay dealing with Percy Shelley, published in the *Journal of Libertarian Studies*. I showed that as a progressive in the early nineteenth century, he was rejecting the old mercantilist system in Britain and arguing for the gold standard. I argued that even a real Marxist would have to see him as a progressive because he was rejecting the remnants of feudalism.

But somehow the Marxist critics missed this point. When critics discuss his essay, "A Philosophical View of Reform," they are utterly puzzled as to why he is arguing for the gold standard. But it is clear that he saw paper money as a tool of the well-connected rich. Critics think of Shelley as a radical whom they ought to like but they have no conception of what radicalism actually meant in those days. It didn't mean socialism as we know it now; it often meant *laissez-faire*.

AEN: What do you say to critics who accuse you of doing the same thing to literature that the Marxists do, only with a different political agenda?

CANTOR: I hear that all the time. That criticism just rolls off my back. The problem with economic criticism of literature is not that it takes account of economics but that it uses bad

THIS IS A GOOD INDICATION OF HOW STRONG THE ANTICAPITALIST MENTALITY IS. THESE PEOPLE WILL PRAISE ANYTHING THAT ISN'T CAPITALISM.

story, set in Germany at the time of the great inflation, the entire culture and economy is turned upside down because of the soaring price of absolutely everything.

The people's time preferences, as Mises called them, were soaring as well. In the inflationary environment, the young had the



economic theory. Generally speaking, it is a mistake to abandon economic and social criticism to the Left, as the Right has done. A perfect example is the old “New Criticism” that wanted to separate the study of literature from anything in the real world. That’s ultimately a sterile and self-defeating position.

The fact is this: Most people come to literature because they are trying to learn something about the world. They are interested in important questions of economics and politics. To attempt to bracket these subjects out and arrive at some mythic purity is impoverishing. The answer isn’t to drain literature of economics and politics, but to use the *right kind* of economics and politics to arrive at a deeper understanding of the world that literature presents us.

To offer students an alternate political-economic perspective

works far better than to demand that they give up political interpretation entirely. Do you fight fire with fire or with a vacuum? There is a real and justified impulse to study literature in a way that yields some greater understanding of the way we live. We shouldn’t tell students: “No, don’t ask those questions!” We should say, “Those questions are legitimate and here’s a perspective you won’t get anywhere else.”

AEN: Are you suggesting that the pre-Marxist view is partially to blame for the rise of the Marxian view?

CANTOR: Quite right. There’s a reason Marxist criticism swept the whole field. New Criticism’s attempt to talk about the “genetic fallacy,” “the heresy of paraphrase,” “a poem should not mean but be”—this is all an attempt to sever literature from any question of meaning. This

left a vacuum that had to be filled.

AEN: Yet, doesn’t it seem that there are intractable predispositions toward socialism in the arts and humanities?

CANTOR: Yes, and I’ve written about this. Under the influence of Mises’s *Anti-Capitalistic Mentality*, I have examined the socialism of H.G. Wells and Oscar Wilde, among others, and attempted to show why it has been in the interest of artists to endorse socialism.

THE FACT IS
THIS: MOST
PEOPLE COME
TO LITERATURE
BECAUSE THEY
ARE TRYING
TO LEARN
SOMETHING
ABOUT THE
WORLD.

On Wilde in particular and his essay, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”: this piece is not often talked about because it is too revealing. It was an attempt at sincerity by the most insincere man who ever lived. And it represents a rare instance when a

socialist author admits that his attachment to socialism is purely aesthetic.

For example, Wilde says that he finds poor people ugly, so therefore he would like someone to take care of them, which almost means to get rid of them. This passage suggests why it is that so many artists have ended up being socialists. They would like someone else to take care of the problem of the un-beautiful.

ONE OF THE GREAT LIES OF SOCIALISM IS THAT IT IS SOMEHOW INTERESTED IN TRUE ART.

AEN: That might explain why Wilde isn't usually listed among the great socialist writers.

CANTOR: And to his credit, Wilde didn't even attempt to make the economic argument. These days, hardly any leftist bothers to do so. In this Wilde essay, you see the core of what remains. He is looking back nostalgically to the age of patronage. He does not like the laws of

supply and demand. He doesn't like the idea that a novel by Anthony Trollope should be successful because people like it. Why should common people be able to judge Wilde?

It is a very good essay to see just how reactionary socialism is. The real key to understanding why Castro is so popular with Latin American authors—and why socialism attracts so many writers and artists—is that these writers feel underappreciated by the market. They are looking for the Great Man, the dictator who will recognize their genius and exalt their talents above the petty bourgeoisie.

This was the reason behind Ezra Pound's fascination with Mussolini, for example. But we know about the authors who are attracted to fascism, yet hear much less about those who are still attracted to socialism. It all stems from the same impulse.

We are now in a situation in which the only arguments remaining for socialism are aesthetic. But one of the great lies of socialism is that it is somehow interested in true art. Whatever might be said about the taste of the masses, it is probably better than that of government bureaucrats who pick and choose art under socialist dictatorship. As patrons of art, socialist dictators have a miserable record.

AEN: And yet Wilde writes in that essay that the ideal government

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

BOOKS:

Paul A. Cantor, *Shakespeare: Hamlet* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Ludwig von Mises, *The Anti-Capitalistic Mentality* (Libertarian Press, 1972).

Michael Valdez Moses, *The Novel and the Globalization of Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

ARTICLES BY PAUL CANTOR:

"Hyperinflation and Hyperreality: Thomas Mann in Light of Austrian Economics," *Review of Austrian Economics* (1994).

"Oscar Wilde: The Man of Soul Under Socialism," in *Beauty and the Critic: Aesthetics in the Age of Cultural Studies*, James Soderholm, ed. (University of Alabama Press, 1997).

"The Poet As Economist: Shelley's Critique of Paper Money and the British National Debt," *Journal of Libertarian Studies* (Summer 1997).

"The Invisible Man and the Invisible Hand: H.G. Wells's Critique of Capitalism," *American Scholar* (Summer 1999).

"Pro Wrestling and the End of History," *Weekly Standard*, October 4, 1999.

"The Simpsons: Atomistic Politics and the Nuclear Family," *Political Theory* (December 1999).

for an artist is no government at all.

CANTOR: Yes, he does. And in his defense, socialism for him doesn't mean the Soviet Union. But this underscores the point that he was very confused: Socialism for Wilde is just an artistic fantasy. What it really comes down to is this: Socialism is not capitalism. It is not the market economy. The consumer is not king. That is why artists are drawn to socialism. They hope that socialism will liberate them from their greatest fear: being judged by the common man.

AEN: You use the term patronage without distinguishing private from public.

CANTOR: There is a distinction between government support of the arts and private support. But there's also a distinction between aristocratic patronage and the commercial marketplace. It is the latter that mostly terrifies artists, though I think it can be shown that the commercial marketplace has actually been very good for art. Tyler Cowen makes this argument.

But we need to be careful not to judge a system of government by the kind of art it delivers. Stalin had pretty good taste in music. He died listening to Mozart's *Twenty-third Piano Concerto*, a recording by Maria Yudina. He had heard it on the radio and demanded that he own it. Unfortunately, it was a live performance he had heard. So Stalin's henchmen

had to roust Yudina and the orchestra out of bed to record it, and the record was delivered the next morning. That was the record on the player when they found Stalin dead.

The capitalist marketplace has at least as good a record in encouraging good art as aristocratic patronage, and certainly far better than government bureaucracy. Of those three categories, aristocratic patronage did very well, especially during the Renaissance. Yet Shakespeare wrote for the market. J.S. Bach wrote for a kind of marketplace, as did Handel. The opera and the novel in the nineteenth century were spurred by a middle-class marketplace.

AEN: For that matter, Wilde himself wrote for the marketplace.

CANTOR: He was very savvy at marketing himself, and he was intensely competitive. He was a master of the media world of the time. That's one of the ironies. Mises is correct to observe that successful artists sometimes have the most intense pro-socialist sympathies. They develop a bad conscience about their success after the public rewards them. They regret having defeated their competitors, and they are not really sure that they are as talented as their profits suggest.

By the way, the world of the Victorian period was much closer to our times than we think. It was the first full-scale commercialization

of high art that we find. Commercial tie-ins were common, so that Wilde's American tour was designed to prepare the way for the opening of Gilbert and Sullivan's opera *Patience*. With every Dickens novel, there were action figures ready to sell. There were many gimmicks of all sorts, such as serialization in magazines, all of which were designed to pitch art to the masses in order to make money. It produced a lot of great art.

MISES IS
CORRECT TO
OBSERVE THAT
SUCCESSFUL
ARTISTS
SOMETIMES
HAVE THE
MOST INTENSE
PRO-SOCIALIST
SYMPATHIES.

It is a Romantic myth that artists are not in it for the money. Many were and are, and that is perfectly okay. It's how they hope to get money that is at issue. In Shakespeare's case, he could write poetry or write drama. He chose to write drama because that's where the money was. Thanks to the marketplace, we have *Hamlet* and *King Lear*.

AEN: You liked the film *Shakespeare in Love* because it showed the commercial side of the playwright.

CANTOR: Yes, that was a virtue of that film, for all of its silly anachronisms. Indeed, we see the first indication of the commercial merging of art and the marketplace in the Elizabethan theater. I have essays on both Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson that cover this topic, showing that



THE NEED OF MARKETS TO APPLY STANDARDS OF UTILITY AND RATIONALITY OFTEN RUBS ARTISTS THE WRONG WAY.

they were both fascinated by the capitalist order beginning to develop in their time.

The first literary treatment of the free market to appear anywhere, so far as I can tell, is Ben Jonson's *Bartholemew Fair*. He essentially argues for spontaneous order. In fact, the play itself is an example of spontaneous order, where the organization appears random but an underlying order begins to emerge as it develops.

AEN: Which particular artists in history are both brilliant and original and perfectly at peace with the commercial marketplace?

CANTOR: A very difficult question. I can't think of any. There is a certain tension between the aesthetic and economic realms. The need of markets to apply standards of utility and rationality often rubs artists the wrong way. At best, what you get are artists who are not completely hostile to the market. For example, Joseph Conrad in his book *The Secret Agent*, defends the classical-liberal order against extremes of right and left. He shows what's wrong with socialism and autocracy. He finally defends the British liberal order, but not with great comfort.

What it comes down to is this: There is something aristocratic

about great art. And artists in many ways have felt more comfortable with aristocrats than with the middle class. In the rare cases when they embrace the classical-liberal order, it is at best half-hearted.

Maybe one of the best literary defenses of capitalism ever is Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, which came out in 1855. She defends the modern industrialists in the city of Manchester. Yet even here, there is a bit of nostalgia for the Old World: the middle-class capitalist protagonist marries into an aristocratic family that takes some of the edge off him.

AEN: What is the effect of government support for the arts?

CANTOR: The idea behind government support for art is that

artists work best when they are comfortable and secure in their finances. Historical evidence suggests the opposite. It is discomfort and insecurity that lead to great art. Government support, by shielding twentieth-century artists from the marketplace, has made art much worse. It has virtually destroyed classical music in our century.

Now, I'm not talking about serialism as such, the origin of which was driven by an inner imperative of artistic development. But why did an entire generation of composers attempt to mimic this technique and do such a bad job? That's where the government, university, and foundation grants were decisive. It's one thing for Schoenberg to compose in the 12-tone method; it's something else for armies of imitators to believe they could make a living by impersonating him.

AEN: Yet it is considered uncouth to criticize any art these days, particularly that which the government has subsidized.

CANTOR: True indeed. I think this stems from the great myth of the first performance of Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. According to legend, the philistine audience at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris rioted in shock and outrage at the innovative new sounds being produced by the orchestra. Yet today, we regard Stravinsky's creation as a masterpiece. The lesson here is supposed to be that we should be

completely uncritical regarding art.

In fact, there were many aspects of the first performance that were bad. The orchestra couldn't play the music. And, more than Stravinsky's music, the audience was objecting to and laughing at Vaslav Nijinsky's choreography and the costumes in particular, which were indeed laughable. There's a movie called *Nijinsky* that featured some scenes that made me think, "What an awful movie. These costumes are so stupid!" Two weeks later, I was at the New York Museum of Natural History, which had a traveling exhibit of the original *Rite of Spring* costumes, and, indeed, the Nijinsky movie was completely accurate.

Because of the myth of that one night in Paris, we are left with a legacy that an audience must never boo a piece of classical music. Even worse, we are under the assumption that if a piece of music is booed, it *must* be good. In fact, a lot of us, if we could see the *Rite* as it was originally performed, would probably hoot it off the stage—if we still have the critical intelligence left to make such judgments. And today, you will notice that it is nearly always performed as a concert piece and not as a ballet. That's why audiences love it.

AEN: What about the argument that twentieth-century art and literature is so disturbing because it was such a blood-soaked era, and

this fact is reflected in painting and music?

CANTOR: I just completed an essay in which I was asked to name the five great books of the twentieth century. I began it with the sentence: "It was a dark and stormy century," as a parody of that famous opening line. It is true this point explains the stories of Kafka and the novels of Orwell and Solzhenitsyn. They reflect

GOVERNMENT SUPPORT, BY SHIELDING TWENTIETH- CENTURY ARTISTS FROM THE MARKETPLACE, HAS MADE ART MUCH WORSE.

the tyranny that governments have generated. Artists tend to draw their inspiration from disturbing events.

Many people think of Kafka as a writer of metaphysical fantasies, portraying a purely dreamlike world. But anyone who, like Mises, grew up with the Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy would

know that Kafka was in many respects a realist. His work resonates with so many today because Kafka is the great chronicler of the absurdities created by modern government.

As for Orwell, I still think he is undervalued: *1984* is, in fact, one of the great novels of the twentieth century. Its insights into the totalitarian mentality did not just apply to Soviet tyranny, as many on the Left would conveniently like to think. It's amazing, for

I HAVE A RULE: BE POLITICALLY CONSERVATIVE, BUT DON'T BE INTELLECTUALLY CONSERVATIVE.

example, to see how well he predicted what we now call political correctness.

He understood how the state can pervert even the logic with which we think. When Orwell wrote " $2+2=5$," it may have sounded over the top, but that type of logic is all too prevalent on campuses today, especially if you look at the politicized attacks on the hard sciences.

The fact that Orwell began as a socialist makes his criticism of left-wing thinking even more searing.

AEN: Your newest interest is popular culture, the study of which has also been dominated by the Left.

CANTOR: Here again, I don't want to see the Left dominate. The Right is making a big mistake by abandoning the field. Whatever one may think of popular-culture studies, it is here to stay. One hundred years from now, if people are studying anything, it will be television and movies from our time. Things that today are dismissed as low-brow will later be studied with a great deal of scholarly attention.

What's more, this is how it's always been. When I was in college in the 1960s, talking about movies in colleges was still suspect. Now it is perfectly ordinary, and now people realize that many old Hollywood directors were great artists.

I have a rule: Be politically conservative, but don't be intellectually conservative. The biggest problem on the Right *vis-à-vis* cultural criticism is this tendency toward fuddydudism. We need to recognize that new things come along in art that are very valuable and worthy of study. Why leave the exciting stuff to the Left? Students are interested in popular culture, and they will gravitate toward people who talk about it seriously.

CALENDAR

REINACH AND ROTHBARD
—AN INTERNATIONAL
SYMPOSIUM
March 29–30, 2001

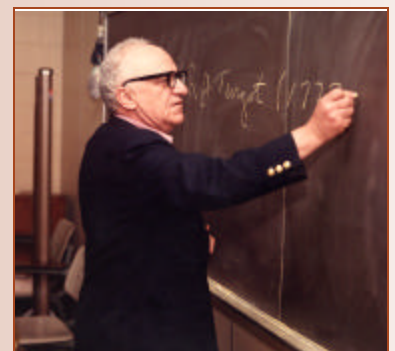
AUSTRIAN SCHOLARS
CONFERENCE 7
March 30–31, 2001

ROTHBARD GRADUATE
SEMINAR 3
May 27–June 2, 2001

HISTORY OF LIBERTY
SEMINAR
June 24–30, 2001

MISES UNIVERSITY 2001
August 5–11, 2001

THE SCHLARBAUM PRIZE 2001
AND
MISES CAMPUS DEDICATION
September 28–29, 2001



For more information
contact the Mises Institute
518 West Magnolia Avenue
Auburn, Alabama 36832-4528
Phone 334-321-2100
Fax 734-448-8148
Email pat@mises.org
Web site www.mises.org

AEN: What is the Left's message concerning popular culture?

CANTOR: No surprise, they see their study of popular culture as making the case against capitalism. Either they say that television shows are secretly duping people into capitalist beliefs, or they say that the supposed lack of quality of these works is a testimony to the culturally impoverishing aspect of capitalism—the aesthetic critique again. You have this theory of “commodification” that says that capitalism debases everything into items that can be bought and sold.

People on the Right end up conspiring with the Left when they deliver assaults on popular culture. Look: If popular culture is as debased and monstrous as many on the Right say it is, that's a terrible indictment of capitalism. It would appear that free markets, left to themselves, debase culture.

And that's just not true. And when you say it is true, that is a huge concession to the Left, which, as I explained earlier, is banking everything on an aesthetic critique of the market economy. What's more, many aspects of popular culture are far more rooted in real-life experience, and a realistic appraisal of politics, than many things you will experience in many kinds of high culture.

AEN: This is a point hinted at by Mises.

CANTOR: That's correct. Any man who grew up in the pre-World War I Austro-Hungarian

Empire, as he did, knew what high culture truly is. He may have heard Mahler conduct, for all I know. So I would not expect him to have much of an appreciation of popular culture. But he did see that the Left was working toward this aesthetic critique of capitalism, such that they would complain constantly about the popularity of bad fiction and the appearance on the market of supposedly shoddy cultural products. His answer was to point out that capitalism provides more of everything for everyone, and, hence, there are more silly novels available. But there are also more great works of literature available at lower and lower prices. There is more good and bad everything available because so much more culture is available.

AEN: Are you really dismissing the critics who say that our artistic standards have dramatically declined?

CANTOR: Here's the trouble. One of the illusions we have today is that we tend to compare all of television with the best of Greek drama or the best of Elizabethan drama. We come away thinking: What the heck has happened to the culture?

But this is just an error. There were about a thousand plays produced in the golden age of Greek tragedy, of which about fifty have survived. There is reason to believe that the better ones were the ones that survived. But if we had the whole range of Greek tragedy, we would find some

works to be as bad as American television.

The sheer quantity of television is what indicts it. One week of television puts on more productions than the Greek dramatists put on in one hundred years. But if you cull out the best of TV, the quality is quite extraordinary. I would be willing to take the twenty best movies of the twentieth century and match them against the artistic products of any other century,

ONE WEEK OF TELEVISION PUTS ON MORE PRODUCTIONS THAN THE GREEK DRAMATISTS PUT ON IN ONE HUNDRED YEARS.

with the exception of William Shakespeare. I don't think there is another century that produced twenty dramas as great as the past century's twenty best movies.

Just think of all the capital that has gone into the motion picture industry. No royal court, no prince of the church, has presented the

arts with as much capital as the free market has placed in the hands of the producers, directors, actors, and composers who work to make movies today. It's extraordinary and wonderful.

AEN: So the substance of your book will be to correct both Right and Left.

CANTOR: Yes, it begins the undertaking of doing pro-capitalist, non-leftist, popular-culture

OVER THE PAST TEN YEARS, I BEGAN TO NOTICE A PATTERN. THE CHANGES IN POPULAR CULTURE REFLECT THIS END-OF-THE- STATE THESIS.

criticism. For example, I argue that *The Simpsons* will go down as one of the great programs in TV history and that its satirical value is highly significant. I think that the *X-Files* has produced some of the most powerful drama that has ever been on television, and that a good episode has all the production value of a movie.

AEN: And how does politics fit in here?

CANTOR: Over the past ten years, I've given lectures on these topics, and I began to notice a pattern. It really helped that the Mises Institute had that "End of the State" conference, because I saw that the changes in popular culture reflect this end-of-the-state thesis.

It really began to fall into place when I saw what *Gilligan's Island* and *Star Trek* had in common. Here are two shows that seem very different. But, in fact the themes are the same: *Gilligan's Island* promotes the Americanization of the globe, and *Star Trek* promotes the Americanization of the galaxy.

In *Star Trek*, the crew had this directive that said that it couldn't interfere in the internal affairs of other planets. But in fact, wherever they went, they encountered places that didn't conform to the political ideals of 1960s America, which basically means the Kennedy administration. Therefore the planets were remade. Their gods had to be killed. Their computers had to be destroyed.

Dr. Spock represented something of the brainy and rationalistic central planner, a sort of McGeorge Bundy with funny ears. Meanwhile, Captain Kirk was the military man of action who imposed order. People talk about it as if it is a prophetic show, but the kind of computers they were said to have are laughable to us today. And today's technology was created,

not by a government, but by private entrepreneurs.

AEN: And *Gilligan's Island*?

CANTOR: Here you have this composite sampling of American society dropped into an uncivilized place, and they miraculously recreate America. Democratic ideology is pervasive. For example, in the episode in which they decide to elect a president, who wins? Not the professor, the skipper, or the millionaire, but the everyman—Gilligan himself.

The theme of the show is that Americans can be dropped anywhere on the planet and not get lost. Fast forward to 1999, and you have *The Blair Witch Project*, in which Americans get lost in a thicket in Maryland, of all places. When the kids sitting around the campfire hum the theme song from *Gilligan's Island*, we are reminded how American sensibilities have changed since the 1960s.

In both shows, the space race provided the ideological-political backdrop. Both shows factor out economics and highlight politics. Both promoted global democratic ideology. Neither had a conception of free markets. Technology is a given. Wealth has no meaning.

The 1960s were the heyday of national television, with three networks dominating. In the 1950s, the networks were just brokers of airtime for coalitions of producers and advertisers. But



improvement over the shows that for twenty years have downgraded fatherhood. I also love the fact that this family is often politically incorrect. Left-liberal myths are attacked at every turn. No one on the Right should object to the portrayal here.

AEN: And the *X-Files*?

CANTOR: In the *X-Files*, the portrayal of the State is even better. The show treats government as an integral part of the grand conspiracy. The level of cynicism

then the FCC made a decision to sever advertising from the decisions about which shows were put on the air. The FCC ended up vastly increasing the power of networks, and their decisions began to reflect the power and priorities of the State. It wasn't nationalization, but it had many of the same effects.

AEN: And today, the message is different?

CANTOR: In *The Simpsons*, wealth is associated with new ideas. Marge becomes an entrepreneur. Homer is always taking odd jobs. Apu Nahasapeemapetilon is forever hawking his Kwik-E-Mart wares. Ned Flanders opens a shop for left-handed people. Many of these enterprises fail, but at least the emphasis is on individual achievement.

The government is represented by the IRS and the FBI. Krusty the Clown gets busted by the IRS and no one really likes the State.

Public-school teacher Edna Krabappel does the minimum necessary to comply with the requirements of the board of education. There is this overriding sense that what the government really wants is to take your money away. It is distant and uncaring.

I recall that Bill Bennett blasted *The Simpsons* as an example of the trash that is out there, but later, he admitted that he had never seen it. In many ways, *The Simpsons* is a postmodern defense of family values. Most of the core action takes place within the family in a small town. There is even an episode when evil government social workers try to take the children away.

Yes, the Simpsons are dysfunctional. But the message is that no matter how bad a particular family is, it is better than no family, and it is better than the government. Whatever you want to say about Homer, he is always there for the kids—and this is a big

THE MESSAGE
IS THAT
NO MATTER
HOW BAD A
PARTICULAR
FAMILY IS, IT IS
BETTER THAN
NO FAMILY, AND
IT IS BETTER
THAN THE
GOVERNMENT.

toward the State in this show would have been inconceivable in the early 1960s, when faith in government was very high indeed. The *X-Files* shows how much more realistic we have become.

In *The Simpsons*, the decline of the nation-state is represented by the triumph of enterprise and the mixed social composition of Springfield. In the *X-Files*, globalization brings disorientation. I use the term globalization in the same sense that the Left does: the increasing integration of the world economy. The impact of globalization is strongly considered in today's popular culture but is absent in shows from the halcyon days of the nation-state. I do think that this is something free marketeers should celebrate.

I'M GOING TO KEEP TRYING TO APPLY AUSTRIAN ECONOMICS TO LITERATURE IN A WAY THAT I HOPE WOULD HAVE PLEASED MISES.

AEN: Do you have any comments on the debate over the politics of *Star Wars*?

CANTOR: Well, I am not a huge fan of the most recent movie in the series, but the one thing I like about the whole series is its appreciation of economics. For example, it demonstrates the capitalist truth about technology, that

it is not all replaced at once. It is understood that in the future, we will still use old technology. You know, one of the failings of science fiction is that it sees any given era as a single temporal slice, as if everything is produced in a single moment. In *Star Wars*, people don't have the capital to buy new technology so they fix up the old stuff. This is a great insight.

AEN: Do you have any comments on the controversies over the canon? In looking at popular culture, are we neglecting the classics?

CANTOR: I think there's some kind of judicious combination that can be made between the old school and the new one. The Left is correct that the canon has always changed. Oxford wasn't teaching Plato until the late 1840s, for example. No university taught Dickens in 1900; it was considered way too vulgar.

There are about five authors who must be part of the canon. But when you start to move away from Shakespeare and Dante and the like, many questions become murky. To me, it is not so much what is taught but how it is taught. I would rather hear a good analysis of the *X-Files* than a boring analysis of Trollope. But I also have a rule: When you talk about popular culture, tie it back into high culture.

AEN: How did you come to study under Mises?

CANTOR: My brother was at the New York University law school

and studying with Sylvester Petro. Through him I was introduced to the thought of Mises. I was in high school, age fifteen, and I read *Human Action*. One Sunday night a friend of mine and I were sitting around, and we had the nutty idea to call up Ludwig von Mises. I got out the Manhattan phone book and my friend called him up at home. I think I remember that number, MOnument 2-7077.

Yes, we had some nerve. I would never do it today. But he was as nice as can be. He invited us up to his office and then to his seminar, which I attended in 1961 through 1962. Rothbard was there, Hazlitt was there, Hayek showed up. It was dazzling.

Mises was the greatest teacher I ever had. Even at age eighty, he was looking for new students. There was that glint and gleam in his eye. I would sometimes sit next to him. He would lecture for two hours with one note card. His energy was extraordinary. It's been my idea of an ideal seminar ever since.

AEN: What's your next project?

CANTOR: I'm going to keep trying to apply Austrian economics to literature in a way that I hope would have pleased Mises. I want to write about the turn to socialist ideology in late Victorian England, for example. There's lots of work to do, even among us non-economists. **AEN**

About the *Austrian Economics Newsletter*

The *Austrian Economics Newsletter* began publishing in the Fall of 1977, under the auspices of the Center for Libertarian Studies, which was then located in New York City. The writers and editors were part of a small but growing contingent of graduate students in economics who had been influenced by Ludwig von Mises's New York seminar and the writings and personal example of Mises's students Murray N. Rothbard and Israel M. Kirzner, as well as Ludwig Lachmann. Their goal was to reinvigorate Austrian theory in a new generation as a means of combating mainstream trends in economic thought.

But for the Nobel Prize given to F.A. Hayek in 1974, academia then considered Austrian economics to be a closed chapter in the history of thought, supplanted by Keynesianism and the neo-classical synthesis. The purpose of the *AEN* was to provide a forum for Austrian students and serve as a communication tool for the new movement. Among its most effective offerings was the interview, which provided students an inside look into the thinking, drawn out in an informal setting, of the best Austrian theorists.

At the request of the Center for Libertarian Studies, the Mises Institute assumed responsibility for the publication in 1984 and nurtured it to become the most closely read periodical in the world pertaining exclusively to the Austrian School. Two years later, Murray N. Rothbard founded the *Review of Austrian Economics* (later succeeded by the *Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics*) to provide an outlet for scholarly articles, thereby relieving the *AEN* of this responsibility. The *AEN* began to emphasize reviews, topical pieces, and, most of all, the extended interview as an effective means of highlighting the newest contributions of Austrians to the literature. Today, interview subjects are now chosen from a variety of disciplines to reflect the full influence of the Austrian tradition.

Over the years, the *AEN* has interviewed a variety of scholars, including the following:

Dominick T. Armentano
Walter Block
James Buchanan
Thomas J. DiLorenzo
Gene Epstein
Roger W. Garrison
James Grant
Bettina Bien Greaves
Gottfried von Haberler
Henry Hazlitt
Randall G. Holcombe
Hans-Hermann Hoppe
Jeffrey M. Herbener
Jesús Huerta de Soto
George Koether

Israel M. Kirzner
Peter G. Klein
Ludwig M. Lachmann
Fritz Machlup
Roberta Modugno
Hiroyuki Okon
Michael Prowse
Murray N. Rothbard
Joseph T. Salerno
G.L.S. Shackle
Karl Socher
Leland B. Yeager
Pascal Salin
Frank Shostak
Richard K. Vedder

Complete archives of these interviews are available at <http://www.mises.org/journals.asp>.

With the expansion and redesign of the *AEN* that begins with Volume 21, the *AEN* seeks to put on display the energy, creativity, and productivity of today's Austrian thinkers, who work in many fields to bring the insights of the tradition to bear on new issues of the day. It is a sign of the health and vigor of the Austrian movement that the list of thinkers slated for interview in the future grows ever longer.

LUDWIG VON MISES INSTITUTE
518 West Magnolia Avenue
Auburn, Alabama 36832-4528
Phone 334-321-2100
Fax 334-321-2119
Email info@mises.org
Web site www.mises.org