Episode 560: Does Capitalism Destroy Culture? Literature and the Market

Guest: Paul Cantor

WOODS: I want to talk about literature, of course, but how can we not say a little something about Ludwig von Mises, because you for one year apparently attended his famous seminar at NYU, where many people who became successful academics in the Austrian tradition also attended? But that means you knew Mises personally. What are your recollections?

CANTOR: Well, he was a very elegant, Old-World gentleman. That struck me very much at the time. I was about 15 years old at the time, but I was very struck by how well dressed he always was and how he carried himself with a courtly manner, which I've learned to associate with the Hapsburg Empire. It's very strange. I mean, I really feel that I was in touch with that Old-World Vienna by meeting this great man. And he was a wonderful teacher.

WOODS: What was it set up like? Was it discussion? Was it him lecturing?

CANTOR: Well, it was mostly him lecturing. It's what I call a European seminar. He would speak for about an hour, typically an hour and 15 minutes, and then took questions, and often the debate grew lively. Murray Rothbard was in that seminar regularly, and he did love to challenge Mises, and there was one occasion where Friedrich Hayek showed up, and Hayek and Rothbard got into an argument. So it was lively, but what I most liked was just listening to Mises talk.

WOODS: Oh sure, no question about it. But of course my listeners are going to have me lynched if I don't ask you if you recall what Rothbard and Hayek argued about.

CANTOR: Well, it was actually a misunderstanding. Let's see, it had something to do with Hayek proposing a hypothetical when we were talking about the Federal Reserve, and the seminar used to be quite close to where the Federal Reserve in New York is, and someone had said something about the convertibility of money to gold and if it were still available in 1962, and Hayek pulled out a $50 bill, which was a lot of money in those days, and said to — I think it was to Rothbard — why don't you just go down to the Federal Reserve, it's two blocks away, and get me $50 worth of gold for this. It was later told that Hayek's hearing had gotten a little bad at that point and that it was probably just a misunderstanding.

WOODS: Okay, all right, well, had to ask, had to ask.

CANTOR: I can see why.

WOODS: You are probably — I've talked to a sociologist or two, but I'd say that in terms of literature, you are one of a handful, and I think that handful contains only one person, because I can't think of anybody else I know of offhand whose specialty is literature who identifies with the Austrian school. So let's of course start there. In the field of literary criticism, Austrians are, you know, not exactly overrepresented.

CANTOR: I think that's fair to say. There are about five others. There is a handful.

WOODS: Okay, there is a handful. All right, so a half a dozen, maybe.

CANTOR: Yeah, yeah.

WOODS: First of all, what exactly is the field of literary criticism, and why is it — is there a way we can account for how it's come to be so dominated by the Left? Is it the nature of the field?

CANTOR: Well, first I should say that we're talking about one wing of literary criticism that is people who talk about economics and literature. There's a vast portion of literary criticism that has nothing to do with economics and is not particularly Marxist. A lot of literary criticism is purely formal. When people talk about the length of a sonnet is 14 lines, they're not making a Marxist statement.

But it is true that insofar as literary critics talk about economics, they are almost uniformly Marxists or pseudo-Marxists or quasi-Marxists. That in part has a historical dimension. It is the Marxists who first began to talk about literature and economics. Marx and Engels were very much interested in literature. They were Old-World Germans in that sense, and so they began it was picked up by a number of critics in the Soviet Union, and so historically the field developed as largely a Marxist field. And again, I'm speaking specifically about the application of economics to literature.

But it has a lot to do with the prejudices of those literary critics who deal with this sort of thing, namely they have a great deal of contempt for the commercial world. In this sense, feeding into this is a whole set of prejudices that are inherited from the Romantic period, and a lot of critics in the 19th century who had a kind of an aristocratic contempt for capitalism. There's a certain irony that in this case, the Left and Marxism have linked up with the Old Right, the anticapitalist, aristocratic Right —

WOODS: I was just going to mention that, yeah.

CANTOR: Yeah, that it is a kind of disdain for anything that could be commercial. And they do point to legitimate phenomena, that there are ways that you can say that literature can be corrupted by commercial considerations. I've countered that with the idea that, in fact, in many ways to the extent that literature is involved in the

marketplace, it actually gets better. I've particularly written about the way the 19th century novel developed in a very competitive marketplace, and Dickens' novels, for example, are all the better for that. It's very hard for my colleagues to understand.

WOODS: Well, there is this sense among some people, and I think we see this in modernism, for instance, you see it in the literary and artistic community, there's very much of a view that the common people shouldn't have to be catered to. I should be free to express myself however I want. Now of course you should be free to express yourself however you want, but what then follows from that is, since the common people are too stupid to recognize my literary merits, I ought to be subsidized.

CANTOR: Exactly, exactly, and that's where these people are making false claims, and I think a lot of modernism went wrong when it took this highly elitist path, and it has led, particularly I'll say in music and painting, to forms of art that are just so hermetically sealed off from the universe that they're essentially not worth anything to anybody except the artists themselves. I think one of the worst developments in 20th century art in general has been the use of government subsidies to shield artists from the marketplace and allow them to indulge themselves in their own petty, ego-building activities.

WOODS: Well, given that we started talking about Mises, I suppose we should mention that Mises more than once makes reference to detective stories as being a classic example of how the masses are interested in just meaningless pap. And he says that, look, the market order is not there to make people better people; it's there to give them what they want, and unfortunately, they want this crummy stuff. So even Mises had a bit of this.

CANTOR: Yes, it's interesting to see, he definitely came out of, again, that Old-World cultural attitude and had exceedingly refined tastes insofar as I could determine, including in literature. But I have to challenge Ludwig. I think in this regard, he did not understand the interplay between what's typically called lower popular culture and higher elite culture. That is, yes, there are many bad detective stories that people are attracted to, but the form does lead to — make possible higher forms of literature, and so that, for example, Joseph Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent* is a variant on the detective story and actually shows signs of having been influenced by Arthur Conan Doyle and the Sherlock Holmes stories.

In my view, all culture is in fact a pyramid in which the elite forms are built on a rather broad base of common or popular forms, and so, for example, I never would have condemned the detective story as a genre completely. There are many subtle and artistic detective stories, even the ones that Conan Doyle wrote. And so when you reject the whole genre, I think it's a mistake and that we need to — this is a perfect example that what you need is a broad basis of culture. I actually see it as, in effect, Darwinian. You need all these people writing detective stories in a marketplace, and the form will actually get better over time.

A critic named Franco Moretti, who's a Marxist critic, has written an essay on this, did a vast study of 19th century detective stories and showed how over time, the market whittled out the more subtle, complicated stories. Believe it or not, it was a long time before writers realized to base their stories on clues. But when audiences responded better to clue-based stories, authors started adopting them. So actually the detective stories are an interesting case where a genre evolves over time in a marketplace and actually gets better and better.

WOODS: All right, first of all, I'm blown away that you had that much to say about detective stories. I thought this was going to be a throwaway line. I didn't realize they put so much —

CANTOR: Hey, it's why I make the big bucks.

WOODS: (laughing) I didn't realize there'd been so much work done on it. Well, let's continue along this line, because I used to be in some of these old right-wing sort of circles that you described that were weirdly anticapitalist for cultural reasons, that of course if a people becomes morally debased, the market is going to sell them further moral debasement, so how can the market be considered a virtue when it plays into people's unformed wishes? I mean, "These are people who have no literary tastes at all. Why should we be glad they're being catered to?" is the standard argument.

CANTOR: Well, I have a higher opinion of people than these old acquaintances of yours. I actually think general taste is not that bad, and I think it actually improves over time, that you can see it in television, for example. Television has gotten more and more intellectually sophisticated over the decades, and I know a lot of people still talk about it as if it was still the day of *I Love Lucy* in the '50s, but television, like any other genre, has evolved, and it's quite amazing to look at shows on television now and see what high expectations they have on the intellectual sophistication of the audience.

Now, the moral issue is a separate one, and I have to admit, I don't get exercised over that myself. Personally I'm not worried about the morals of television. I'm in some ways very much an aesthete myself, and I'm interested in the intellectual sophistication. And there it's quite amazing the process that's gone on between the American public and the creatives of television, how increasingly sophisticated the works have become till we get to something like *Breaking Bad*, for example.

WOODS: Right, which you and I mentioned before we started talking, right.

CANTOR: Yeah, the writing in that show is so extraordinarily sophisticated, and the depth with which it approaches its moral issues, it's really Shakespearean.

WOODS: Yeah, I want to get back to that, because I love that show, and I think it's my favorite show of all time. It's interesting, I have to — I'm raising five girls, and I don't want them to be snobs, but I do want them to have some cultivation, so I want to balance things, and for example, a lot of the music I listen to is not very popular, but

it's still really good. But at the same time, I say to them I don't like it just because other people don't like it. I said my favorite show of all time is one of the most popular shows of all time, so it is possible certainly for people to get things right.

But I want to give an example that you've given in the past, which is, if I'm remembering this right, your claim is that a lot of times we're inclined to look at, you know, centuries or even millennia ago and say that was the golden age of literature, and we'll look at the great dramas of the Greek world and say look at these tremendous dramas. But of course what we need to remember is the lousy ones didn't survive to us. We have the prize-winning ones, the ones that people took the care to preserve for us —

CANTOR: Exactly.

WOODS: — so that maybe if we put those up against the best that we have and we took their crummy ones and put them against our crummy ones, we wouldn't come out so bad after all.

CANTOR: Yes, that's exactly my point, that we have about 33 Greek tragedies of some 1,000 that were produced in 5th century Athens, and they are the best of the lot. People never say refer ones we've lost and know only by name and say these were better than Sophocles' or Aeschylus' or Euripides' plays. Although the irony is that even the very best of the plays Plato condemned and on moral grounds. And so we should always remember that when people make a blanket condemnation of the morality of television today, Plato was making a blanket condemnation of the Greek drama of his day, and he was specifically talking about Aeschylus and Sophocles and Euripides, judging by the references in his dialogues.

So I think people often overreact on this moral question and don't appreciate the issue of aesthetic sophistication. It's the same of course with Shakespeare. He was condemned for the immorality of his plays in his own day, and the whole theater that we now prize from Shakespeare's day, the Puritans wanted to shut it down and actually did in 1642 when they came to power. So what I see is a perpetual struggle between artists and a kind of policing state that wants to pose a limited conception of morality on what artists are doing.

WOODS: Let's jump back to the Marxism question. If somebody is a Marxist literary critic, how am I going to be able to tell that in the person's work? What kind of themes or what kind of emphasis will I see?

CANTOR: Well, just look for the word "hegemony" —

WOODS: (laughing) Okay.

CANTOR: — or the word "commodify" and look for any four, five, and six syllable words. You know, what you will see is first of all the stretching of class consciousness, that authors will be viewed as locked into a particular class consciousness, usually

middle class consciousness, and they will be treated as the ideological dupes of capitalism and will be seen as offering this false consciousness defense of capitalism.

Now, Marxist criticism has morphed into cultural criticism now. The issue is less class now and more race and gender and ethnicity. Different set of prejudices, but the same basic idea. So the best sign of a Marxist critic or one of these cultural critics now is they don't take the author seriously, don't try to understand authors as they understand themselves. They always try to produce an argument that will easily reveal the authors to be captive of some limited consciousness, or possibly in some cases they'll show an author who manages to liberate himself and offer a socialist or generally Marxist reading of the world.

So in general what you will see in Marxist critics is a whole lot of theory and very little close reading of the works themselves to see what the authors themselves were trying to express. They dismiss that as simply a false consciousness.

WOODS: Right, right.

CANTOR: You see the word "false consciousness," you know you've found a Marxist critic.

WOODS: (laughing) Yeah, there you go. That would scream Marxism for you. I'm looking right now at the Amazon page for your book *Gilligan Unbound: Pop Culture in the Age of Globalization*. You have devoted scholarly attention to popular culture. Not everybody does. There are quite a few Marxists who I've seen do it —

CANTOR: Yeah.

WOODS: — and they do a terrible, terrible job. Oppression everywhere for them. They suck all the life and the fun out of everything. But —

CANTOR: Yeah, I try to restore the fun to the serious —

WOODS: Yeah, so what's your work all about? Like, what are you finding in popular culture? Because other people would of course look down on that.

CANTOR: Well, what I do is try to take these shows seriously and see what they get at. And in fact, you know, in some ways my test case was *Gilligan's Island*. Normally I write about shows that I feel are to some extent sophisticated. In that book I also discuss *Star Trek*, *The Simpsons*, and above all, *The X Files*, which I think is one of the most sophisticated shows ever to be on television. I can't wait — less than a month now till we'll see six more episodes of it.

But *Gilligan's Island* was a kind of test case for me. It actually develops a rather interesting understanding of American democracy, and in particular what I saw about it is it challenges all of the traditional aristocratic claims to rule. Mr. Howell represents wealth and tradition, the Skipper represents a kind of military prowess, and

the Professor represents brains and the intellectual lead. And what it showed is that in America, the common man truly rules. Gilligan, the man without qualities, to use an Austrian phrase from Robert Musil, who I gather Mises knew. But anyway, here's this guy who's just kind of ordinary, a nobody, and yet he's always saving them. And I actually was in contact with Sherwood Schwartz, who created this show, and he confirmed my interpretation of it. So that's an example. Again, I consider that the kind of extreme example. If you can find meaning in *Gilligan's Island*, you can find it in anything.

But normally I try to write about shows that are much more sophisticated than that, and my point is to try to figure out what these creators are doing. I try to read pop culture shows the way I learned to read Shakespeare, and sometimes, as in the case of *Deadwood* or *Breaking Bad*, these shows achieve an almost Shakespearean level in their sophistication, the quality of the writing.

WOODS: I'm a tremendous *Simpsons* fan. I remember even in college, which was years and years and years ago, the show's been on so long, we could sit around for hours regaling each other with favorite *Simpson* moments and lines. And, I mean, Homer is so gloriously stupid that his lines are just astonishingly good. (laughing) I don't know how they came up with them.

But I feel like I'm just compelled to talk to you a little bit about *Breaking Bad*, which is my favorite show of all time. And I just happened to see a reference to it on Facebook, somebody saying, hey, I'm really enjoying this show, and we were out of things to watch, so we decided, what the heck, we'll give this a try. And we were just glued. We couldn't stop watching it. And the thing is that my experience with seeing Bryan Cranston as an actor would not have led me to the conclusion that he could pull off this role.

CANTOR: You know, it's funny. There's an episode of *Malcolm in the Middle*, I think it's the first episode of Season 2, where he becomes Walter White.

WOODS: Oh.

CANTOR: It's fascinating to see. I happened upon it by accident, but there's an episode where he has a dream sequence when he gets fed up with his wife and having to cow-tow to her, and his anger comes out, and that's a profound — I mean, they obviously had no idea who Walter White was there, but you can see in Bryan Cranston the actor his capacity for that range. It's where he found his inner Walter White. I think it's a very, in fact, profound comment on *Breaking Bad*.

WOODS: I didn't see — well, I barely watched that show, just enough to know I wasn't interested, but how about that, because he just — he was just — I mean, all the people on the show were just absolutely stunning in their performances. So good.

CANTOR: You know that he was Jerry Seinfeld's dentist, too.

WOODS: I did recognize him there. That was the first role that I remembered him in. I said, now this guy looks familiar to me. He was the guy — he converted to Judaism for the jokes.

CANTOR: Yes, and Jerry turned out to be an anti-dentite.

WOODS: (laughing) That's right.

CANTOR: But he was in a great episode of *The X Files* called "West," and that's when Vince Gilligan got to know him and knew he was right for Walter White.

WOODS: But to watch him — what was weird about the show is, I think of myself as a fairly upstanding individual, and yet, as the guy is descending into, you know, the most horrifying behavior, I'm weirdly cheering for him (laughing).

CANTOR: Well, good for you, because — I've met Vince Gilligan. I spent a good amount of time with him, spent about 20 minutes with him once talking to him about the show, and I feel that he didn't get it, that he thought we should be rooting against Walter White —

WOODS: That's right.

CANTOR: — and there was quite a division in the audience. And I'll just say this: that Vince Gilligan doesn't know what a tragic hero is. This is one — oddly enough, I'm going to begin my work on *Breaking Bad* tomorrow, as it happens. I'm going to re-watch the whole show. But in Gilligan's mind, there's only two alternatives: a hero and a villain. And he thinks this is a story of a nice man who became a villain.

But what I think the genius of *Breaking Bad* is, and here libertarians can get interested in the show, is it shows how frustrating the modern world has become in the regulated, administered state, where people have no outlets for their creativity, where they end up teaching for the state in a boring high school job, and finally, through these strange circumstances of his cancer and his desire to help his family, he finds something where he can put his talent to work.

This is a man who lived a tremendously frustrated life, and yes, he becomes a villain, but he becomes a super villain. I like to think of him as a kind of Clark Kent figure, that by day, he has this ordinary identity of a mealy, ordinary guy who's put upon by everybody, but at night he comes this superhero/super villain. He becomes Heisenberg. And suddenly, "I am the danger," as he puts it. He's not the person who has to cower and fear of everything around him, including his wife and his relatives and the high school regime. Suddenly he's the man in power, and that makes him in my view a tragic hero, like Macbeth, for example.

I find it sad that when people talk about popular culture, they lose sight of this magnificent concept we get from Shakespeare of the tragic hero. And if you look at Macbeth, he does many, many evil things. He's a horrible man in that sense, and

Shakespeare doesn't mitigate that, but he shows you how a decent, heroic man who's been celebrated by his community at the beginning of the play for hacking someone in half because the guy was on the other side, how he is led by the frustrations of his situation to become villainous in his deeds.

So I think of Walter White as a tragic hero and the tragic hero of the modern condition, of the administered world that we live in. I'm very interested in *Better Call Saul*, this prequel —

WOODS: Yeah.

CANTOR: — and I wrote a piece for *The Austrian* on *Better Call Saul*, giving this interpretation of it. But Gilligan has a massive — this is Vince Gilligan, not the guy from — Vince Gilligan has a wonderful feel for the frustrations of the modern bureaucratized world, where everybody feels like he's a cog in the machine. And really Walter White's journey was one of self-discovery. I don't mitigate the terrible things he did —

WOODS: Right, but by the very end, he is honest with himself about what it is all about.

CANTOR: Yes, and he has the kind of recognition, anagnorisis, as Aristotle says, of the tragic hero, of recognizing that what he did was wrong and how destructive it was. But you know, like any tragic hero, he's a victim of his own greatness, that it's precisely what's great about him that destroys him, and it's what he discovers in the course of these developments about himself. And one of his great recognitions in the last season is I did do this for myself, that I like this.

WOODS: Yeah. We had all learned that about him years earlier, but he finally saw it.

CANTOR: Yes, and it's in a way very Nietzschean. It's a profound show for all those reasons.

WOODS: And it had a very good concluding episode, which is hard to pull off.

CANTOR: Oh yes. Now, Gilligan from the beginning intended it to be five seasons. He didn't run to his promise, same as *The X Files* did, dragging out the extra seasons and running out of material and stars. And so from the beginning, he had an arc for the whole series, but they didn't know quite how to end it from they beginning. They worked out the ending, tried out many different possibilities for the ending. It's a good example of how a show evolves and how they use feedback from the audience to get to the ending.

But yes, I consider it the best-written show of all time, because it had such a good ending. *Deadwood*, which would be my alternate choice, unfortunately didn't get to end where David Milch wanted it to end. It was cut off, so it doesn't have that perfect closure that *Breaking Bad* does.

I'm fascinated by this long form of the TV series now. It's unprecedented in the history of art. There's never been — Wagner's *Ring Cycle* is a baby, only 17 ½ hours long compared to, I think *Breaking Bad's* I think 62 episodes. These are tremendously challenging artistic forms, and Gilligan's a master of it, as we're seeing now with *Better Call Saul*.

WOODS: I kept marveling at all different things during the series, but even a small thing like the range that Cranston had came through in every time after you reach a threshold, you know, after which his wife realizes he's not a trustworthy person, when he would tell a lie, we knew it was a lie because we're sort of the omniscient observers, but — we knew it was a lie, but he told it in a way that sounded almost plausible, but is just fake enough to be a lie. So in other words, he lies the way a real person lies. You kind of almost believe it yourself, but it's not really coming out the way other things you say in the series are coming out. Somehow he got that subtlety exactly right. And we can see in her face that from the minute he opened his mouth she knew it was a lie. The dynamic was beautiful.

CANTOR: Yeah, it's an interesting — again, it's an example of what it takes to make a great show and how actors contribute to the show. Now again, we say Vince Gilligan created the show, and he did in the sense that he wrote it, but he had a lot of help with the writing and a lot of help with the actors. You work with the actors, and you start to learn what they can do, and you press them further. They do it; they do it better than you thought, and so you press them even further. That's how a show gets better and better.

And by the way, that happened to Shakespeare. He was working with a set of actors. The comedian in the group was a man with the name Bill Campbell, did a lot of dancing and self-dialogues. He left the group, they brought on a guy named Robert Armin who specialized in fools and was a good singer, and Shakespeare must have been so impressed with this guy, he wrote *King Lear* and created this part for the fool in that play, which seems like this incredible act of creative genius and was, and yet it never would have happened if he didn't have his Bryan Cranston, if he didn't have Robert Armin there to show him that you could do a lot with this stock character, the fool.

So that's what I talk about when I talk about the feedback process in the creation of art that is actually a factor of it being a marketplace phenomenon. Audiences love Robert Armin; Shakespeare says, I'm going to write the greatest part ever for a fool, and we're going to call it *King Lear*. And clearly Gilligan was inspired by working with Bryan Cranston and other actors in the show.

WOODS: Paul, fascinating conversation. I really appreciate the time. I mean, I guess I've met you once or twice, but I've always wanted to sit down and have this kind of conversation. I bet we could talk about *Breaking Bad* forever. But if people want to follow what you're doing, is there a particular book they should read or website they should visit?

CANTOR: Well, they should go to the book I did, *Literature and the Economics of Liberty*. It's published by the Mises Institute, and being what they are, they make a PDF of it available for free. So if you just go to Mises.org and look me up, you'll find this book. The coeditor is Stephen Cox at the University of California - San Diego. He's number two among Austrian economists in literature, and it's got essays by Darío Fernández-Morera and Tom Peyser and Chandran Kukathas, who actually studied with Hayek at the LSE, London School of Economics, and is now a professor at the London School of Economics. So he's actually a political scientist, but Darío Fernández-Morera a comparative literature professor and Tom Peyser's an English professor. So in that book you can get a good sampling — there's essays on *Don Quixote* and Walt Whitman and Joseph Conrad. You can get a good sample of what we'll call an Austrian approach to literary criticism.

A former student of mine named Michael Valdez Moses has written a book called *The Novel and the Globalization of Culture*, which above all has an essay on Mario Vargas Llosa, the great Peruvian author who's very sympathetic to capitalism and a kind of disciple of Anan de Soto. So that's the handful right there. Oh yes, Fred Turner, *Shakespeare and 21st Century Economics*. Six-finger hand there. We've got the six literature professors that I know of that deal with Austrian economics.

But beyond that, you can go to YouTube. I did a series of lectures on commerce and culture for the Mises Institute that are available there, where I develop a lot of these ideas at length, lectures on classical music and on painting and on movies and television. So just search my name on YouTube, you can find a lot of stuff there, and it's all free.

WOODS: Well, I'm going to make it easier on people. We'll link to it — this is Episode 560, so at TomWoods.com/560, we'll link to the book that you mentioned, and we'll link to that series of lectures. We'll also link to some of your other work, so the clearing house page for this episode is TomWoods.com/560. Professor Cantor, thanks so much again for your time.

CANTOR: Thank you for having me on your show.