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THE CAPITALIST MUSE

In Praise of Commercial Culture

Tyler Cowen

Harvard University Press, 1998, xi + 278 pgs.

Cultural pessimists such as John Ruskin claim that capitalism leads to a decline in literature, painting, and music. The market panders to the debased tastes of the masses and strikes a mortal blow at “high” art. Another Victorian, Matthew Arnold, in his classic *Culture and Anarchy*, indicted “our Liberal friends,” including John Bright, for their “mechanical” adherence to *laissez faire*. Their single-minded devotion to the market put culture at risk. (Oddly, Cowen’s erudite book mentions neither Ruskin nor Arnold.)

How might a defender of capitalism respond? One way is to admit the crime but exonerate the suspect. Culture is indeed in a bad way today, but the market is not to blame. It isn’t the fault of the free market that no composer today can match Mozart or Beethoven: to replace the market will not make artistic genius appear.

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A Quarterly Review of Books, by David Gordon

Tyler Cowen in this ambitious book replies to the anti-capitalist argument on entirely different lines. Culture in the present, far from being in decline, is in great shape. "The cultural optimist position does not seek to make the achievements of modern creators commensurable with the achievements of the past, just as we cannot... ascertain whether five or ten Beatles songs might add up in value to one Haydn string quartet. It can be said, however, that modern creators have offered the world a large variety of deep and lasting creations that are universal in their scope and significant in their import" (p. 9).

Many of us, I dare say, will find it quite easy to judge Haydn superior to the Beatles. But our author has much more in store for us than a gush over a rather tame group by present-day standards. Rap music, it seems, is also part of the cultural renaissance that capitalism has created. "Rap music has

received special opprobrium, and is commonly associated with riots, murder, and obnoxious boom boxes. But approached from another context and freed from its sometimes threatening tone, rap is a startling musical achievement. Rap interweaves advances in musical technology with the cultural clothing of modern urban black America" (p. 173).

I suppose we should at least be grateful that Mr. Cowen's praise extends only to rap music "freed from its sometimes threatening tone." But I speak too soon: the concession has been made only to be at once withdrawn. Cowen cannot contain himself where speaking of "hard" rap: "Hard rap forces us to encounter contemporary music and poetry at their most barbaric. It uses violence in the artistic tradition of Shakespeare, Bosch, and Verdi to create an entrancing fervor" (p. 175).

Readers may well wonder: how low can he go? (Not me, of course: I mean Professor Cowen's taste for barbarism.) I fear that we have not yet reached bottom. Opponents of government funding for the arts have often held up to ridicule the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe and the sculpture of Andrés Serrano. Defenders of the NEA counter that the grants to these purveyors of vice were aberrations: should we not be willing to tolerate a few rotten apples in return for the government's promotion of good art?

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Cowen's slant on the issue differs from both positions just sketched out. He does not favor government funding of the arts, but he thinks that Mapplethorpe and Serrano are successes of the National Endowment. "The result is an agency whose best and most innovative actions—such as funding exhibits of Robert Mapplethorpe and Andrés Serrano—are precisely those that offend its taxpaying supporters" (p. 38).

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Our author later uses his admiration for these artists to take a swipe at those libertarians not so culturally enlightened as he. "Despite their protests, many libertarians are glad to hear that the NEA sometimes funds dubious art. They would rather have their negative view of government confirmed than enjoy a great public mural. Since Mapplethorpe's photos and Serrano's *Piss Christ* give them marketable fodder for attack, they assume that these artists must be degenerate and low quality" (pp. 199–200).

One might at this point raise an objection to the line of criticism of Cowen implicit in my foregoing remarks. I have suggested that his defense of markets is in one respect worse than useless. He merely holds up to praise exactly the sort of trash that critics of the market adduce as their prime cases of cultural decline. What good is this?

But, you may object, my criticism is fatally flawed. I have suggested, in my usual sneering tones, that rap music, Mapplethorpe, and Serrano are not ornaments of modern culture. But am I not just opposing my preferences to Cowen's? I have expressed disgust for what he admires: that is no argument.

And may we not go further? Cowen knows vastly more about rap music and similar wonders than I. He speaks learnedly of Schoolly-D, NWA, the Geto Boys, Public Enemy, and the Wu-Tang Clan, of whom I know nothing. (I had thought the NWA a professional wrestling association of some years ago.) Given this disparity in knowledge, is not Professor Cowen's judgment likely to be sounder than mine?

The first objection rests on an aesthetic philosophy that I reject. It reduces disputes about art to differences in taste not subject to rational resolution. As the nineteenth-century novelist Mrs. Margaret Hungerford famously expressed this view, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." I

should contend, contrary to our author and Arthur Danto, that it is objectively true that Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* are not significant works of art (p. 28). To think otherwise, as Danto does, is ridiculously to inflate the importance of "self-referential" art.

But, you may continue, this is mere assertion on my part. Surely defenders of degenerate art like Cowen will not grant me an entire aesthetic philosophy as a premise. The point is well

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taken, and the task of elaborating objective principles of art far exceeds my powers. (In literature, Irving Babbitt and Yvor Winters have, I think, at least made a good beginning.)

But the objection does not much help Cowen. Since he defends the art that critics damn as degenerate, it is up to him to make a case for his

aesthetics. I can assume my comfortable and usual role as critic, and attempt to knock down the arguments he advances. Unless he justifies his aesthetics, his case for contemporary culture is of mere biographical interest.

As to the second objection, a simple observation suffices to dispatch it. It is not always the case that more knowledge of a subject better equips one to judge it. No doubt astrologers are much better acquainted with their pseudo-science than are critics; but is it not the latter who manifest better judgment?

In the space remaining, then, let us address Cowen's arguments in defense of present-day art. For one thing, he claims that his beloved modern music is as complex as the great music of the past: "The premise that the creations of twentieth-century music are less complex than the classics is dubious.... The songs of Jerome Kern, Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, or the Beatles are arguably no less compositionally complex (and perhaps more complex) than the Lieder of Schubert. Schubert wrote about 700 songs, most of which no one ever listens to or analyzes. Many of these songs are technically and compositionally undistinguished" (p. 180).

Let us grant Cowen his claim about complexity; why does the fact that a song is more complex than a Schubert composition qualify it as a better work of art? Why is complexity a criterion of aesthetic merit? I

suspect Cowen has mistaken complexity for the familiar principle of organic unity, which celebrates unity-in-variety. The entire point of this latter principle is to identify a criterion of beauty, a word that seems absent from Professor Cowen's vocabulary. Would he really want to say that the Beatles' music is as beautiful as Schubert's? Would readers?

But what of Cowen's point that not all the Lieder of Schubert are great? Perhaps so: once more I bow to his superior learning. But a supporter of the cultural decline view may argue that this does not refute him. Should not the state of culture be judged by its supreme products, rather than its average ones? And if the best of Schubert surpasses the best of the Beatles, he may say, we have an instance of cultural decline.

Too often Cowen assumes that in art, more is better. Thus, he argues that art progresses because new works provide us with additional ways of interpreting old works. "Art creates an interdependent language whose whole exceeds the sum of the parts. Masterpieces therefore provide more satisfaction and insight as we accumulate artistic experiences.... The more music we know, the more we can hear in the compositions of Bach and Beethoven" (pp. 27-28).

Cowen's point, taken as he acknowledges from T.S. Eliot, is a good one; but it does not prove what he wants it to. From the fact that new

works give us new interpretations, it does not follow that our new view is better than our old. Perhaps previous interpretations have been forgotten; and even if not, once again it does not follow that the more interpretations, the better. Why is an abundance of interpretations to be preferred to a more detailed exploration of a lesser number?

UPCOMING EVENTS

*HUMAN ACTION 50TH
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SCHLARBAUM PRIZE TO
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AND GALA DINNER*

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*AUSTRIAN SCHOLARS
CONFERENCE 5*

April 16-17, 1999
Auburn University
(Papers, panels, and topics
are now being accepted)

MISES UNIVERSITY

August 7-14, 1999
Auburn University

*1998 FALL QUARTER WEEKLY
WORKSHOP AT AUBURN*

*Murray N. Rothbard's
POWER AND MARKET*

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A similar fallacy infects Cowen's account of one of his best points. Cowen rightly notes that under capitalism, the masses have access to a vast number of the great masterpieces of the past. Those who do not share Cowen's preference for the Beatles over Schubert can have all the Lieder they want. It is also true, as Cowen says, that "forms of professional cultural criticism, all relatively new professions, owe their [existence? D.G.] thanks to capitalist wealth" (p. 27–28). Do we not live in the best of times, so far as art is concerned?

A proponent of the cultural decline thesis need not agree; and as usual, Cowen bypasses his concerns. Once more, what of those who think that the state of art in a period should be judged by its supreme masterworks, rather than by the spread and variety of the art available in it? And what of the argument, advanced among others by Eliot, that the height of culture is characterized by a unity of artistic production, based on a shared tradition?



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Eliot's thesis of a dissociation of sensibility, which began in English literature in the seventeenth century, is not refuted by ignoring it.

Further, Cowen's excellent point that the capitalist market makes art available to the masses was advanced long before him by Ludwig von Mises, in *The Anti-Capitalistic Mentality* and by Edward Banfield, in *The Democratic Muse*. Our author finds neither of these works worthy of mention: no doubt Mises and Banfield lack the openness to new trends of Alvin Toffler, whom Cowen does cite.

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I have no doubt been unfair to this book, of course by design. It includes much valuable discussion of the way in which changes in technology affect art. But it is not clear how this material speaks to the book's ostensible subject, the question of cultural decline under capitalism. How does the vast profusion of facts in this book fit into a coherent thesis? Timur Kuran, in a blurb, refers to the book's "delightfully parsimonious arguments." I wonder whether this is altogether a compliment? ▀

IS IT REALLY ROTHBARD?

Money and the Nation State: The Financial Revolution, Government, and the World Monetary System

Kevin Dowd and Richard H.
Timberlake, Jr., Editors
Transaction Publishers, 1998, viii +
453 pgs.

When I received this book, I turned first to the contribution of Murray N. Rothbard, “The Gold Exchange Standard in the Interwar Years” (pp. 105–65). It is a characteristically brilliant piece, showing in detail how Benjamin Strong and Montagu Norman used the gold exchange standard to further their schemes of monetary manipulation.

But as I read the essay, several passages startled me. They did not seem

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genuinely Rothbardian; the Murray I knew would not have written them.

As I read the passages that aroused these misgivings, a remark that Murray made in conversation several years ago came back to me. He complained that he had been asked by the editors of this volume to make a number of changes in his essay. He was not disposed to accede to this request: if the editors insisted, he intended to withdraw his essay from the collection. I understand that he made similar statements to others.

Now, after his death, the essay has appeared; and it includes the “un-Rothbardian” passages. What was I to do? With typical timidity, I decided to ignore the matter: after all, suspicion is not proof.

Meanwhile, I have obtained a copy of Murray’s original manuscript for his article. When I compared it with the version in this book, I was shocked. The distortions far exceed what I had feared. I do not know who is responsible for them, so I shall refer in the following to the “editors” or “redactors,” meaning by these terms whoever has made the changes about which I complain. These terms do not refer to Professors Dowd and Timberlake, whose role, if any, in the distortions I do not know.

Let us begin, appropriately for this topsy-turvy product, at the end. The essay, in its present rendition, finishes in this way: “Although it is unlikely in