

Filthy Lucre Is Good for the Soul (Book Review)

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In Praise of Commercial Culture, Tyler Cowen, Harvard, 278 pages

Capitalism is better than any other 'ism' at delivering the goods--food, cars, shoes, and the other materials of everyday life. But few people associate capitalism with culture. In fact, many see the two as antithetical. Tyler Cowen, an art-loving economist, disagrees. Far from hurting culture, Cowen argues in his book, *In Praise of Commercial Culture*, capitalism nurtures it.

Precisely because capitalism delivers the goods, Cowen writes, people have the means to buy books, paintings, and other forms of art. Improvements in production and marketing, for example, as well as increased wealth, have made books available to the masses. In 1760 a common laborer had to work two days to earn enough money to buy a cheap schoolbook; today the cost of a paperback is slightly more than the hourly minimum wage.

Capitalism has also made it easier for artists and musicians to make a living without depending on a rich patron. This artistic freedom has been especially important for female authors. Patrons preferred men, but when writers began to compete for readers rather than for favors, women had a chance. That's how Jane Austen and the Brontes flourished.

Pessimists who think the culture is going downhill are probably wrong, Cowen adds. What's considered good has to pass the test of time. Remember, Shakespeare's contemporary critics thought he was lowbrow. And we have Shakespeare's plays today because a commercial press published them and the commercial theater produced them.