

For Liberty

In Memorium

Gary North

I am a scribbler by profession and preference, and I have cranked out more than my fair share of forgettable words. But compared to Murray Rothbard's output, I am a piker. Murray's throw-away essays in obscure ideological journals with a life expectancy of three years or less were of greater intellectual value than most articles published in the prestige scholarly journals. This may be why he never bothered to publish much in scholarly journals -- "incompetence by association" -- and why his essays would have been returned promptly if he had tried. The visibly less competent do not want to be shown up by comparison.

As a stylist, he was a master. The gray sludge rhetoric of academic discourse never intruded into his pages except when he was quoting some scholar verbatim, which he rarely did. Rare is the occasion when a reader with an IQ above Forrest Gump's says to himself, "This just isn't clear" when reading something by Rothbard. He wrote to be understood, and he was understood, which is why he was academically unemployable for most of his career.

With the exception of Isaac Newton, those who have re-shaped Western culture's thinking have been recognized only posthumously by the academic guild. Marx never got a university teaching position. Neither did Darwin. Neither did Freud. If you are recognized as a giant by the academic guild when you are alive, you will probably be superseded and forgotten within a generation: a defender of one more lost cause in a profession dedicated to lost causes. Think of Mises. His main academic post, at New York University, was as an untenured visiting professor: Larry Fertig put up the money to pay his salary. He got this job when he was about 63 years old. Rothbard's posts at Brooklyn Polytechnic and at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, were not granted for the magnitude of his academic accomplishments. His ideas will penetrate the academic community only when college professors are no longer on the public payroll. This will take a while.

He achieved more lasting scholarly output in approximately one year of publishing than most scholars achieve in a lifetime: *The Panic of 1819* (1962), *Man, Economy, and State* (1962), and *America's Great Depression* (1963). He threw in four volumes of colonial American history, *Conceived in Liberty* (1975-79), almost as an afterthought. He never got around to writing the fifth. It was a spare time project. Astounding.

In response, the academic community shrugged its collective shoulders. (My apologies to his memory: I have invoked a collective.) It took two decades for any historian to pick up the trail in *America's Great Depression*: Paul Johnson, in *Modern Times*. Johnson is also a near-outcast among academic historians, but he is one of the great historians of this century, which is why he is not employed by any university and why he was smart enough and professionally immune enough to give Rothbard his due. So, those of us who recognized his greatness during his lifetime, and who shamelessly tapped into his fertile mind in our quest to make sense of the world, have been fringe people. But it is better to be an academically unemployable fringe scholar footnoting Rothbard as a reliable source than to be a tenured professor footnoting Paul Samuelson or Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

