

How a Marxist of Twenty-Five Years Became a Misesian Libertarian

by Michael Rectenwald



In the fall of 2016, I was a [left communist](#). As I will show below, I came to this position after a circuitous tour through numerous sects of Marxism. A year later, I had thoroughly renounced Marxism and embraced the views of free market economists and philosophers Ludwig von Mises and Murray Rothbard. How did a career world tourist of left intellectual and radical movements find a home in libertarian social and economic thought? And why did it take twenty-five years to defect?

As any Marxist can tell you, ideology can blind one to the insights that might disrupt one's political adhesions, often against one's own best interests. Only it was Marxist ideology itself that blinded me. From where did this ideology emanate? From the institutions with which I had been involved for twenty-five years, most especially from my sojourn through academia.

Down the Rabbit Hole of Academic Leftism

I was burned out from a career in advertising and decided to go to graduate school. All through my advertising career, I had been writing poetry and short fiction. The more I pursued this avocation, the more I became alienated from advertising, and the greater my desire to change my life.

I left a relatively high-income career to undertake what some told me was not only impossible but possibly insane. I had a few friends in the know. They repeated the well-worn truisms. "There are no jobs in academia." "As a white male, your chances of getting a job in the humanities are quite remote." "You can't raise three children, do full-time graduate work, teach at least one class per semester [required for the tuition remission and stipend], and hold down yet another job, all at the same time." These warnings did not dissuade me. In fact, remarkably, they strengthened my resolve.

But I did have three children and a wife to support, so I couldn't just quit everything and go back to school. I needed a job that would support my academic ambitions. I landed a position at Penn State, Erie, the Behrend College, teaching advertising and running the sales force of interns for the campus-based radio station. This would be my transitional job, I thought. My wife, Gretchen, went along with my plans and picked up some of the slack money-wise, by eventually returning to her career in property management. I enrolled in a graduate program at Case Western Reserve University, in Cleveland. Because I was a full-time employee,

Penn State would cover half of my tuition. We rented a farmhouse west of Erie, on a property with a couple large ponds and five acres of land. I didn't want my wife and kids to suffer while I embarked on my long march through the institutions of academia.

However, the career path I'd chosen involved transformations of a wholly different kind than expected. The sharp reduction in income, the many nights of curtailed sleep, the sacrifice of almost all other forms of "entertainment," the stress and strain on family and marriage, and the certain prospect of uncertain prospects—these were only the preconditions of the story, not the story itself.

My academic advisor at Case recommended that I begin with one class per semester and suggested an initial course entitled Cultural Criticism. I soon learned that it was taught by the maverick in an otherwise more "traditional" literature department, [Martha Woodmansee](#). Martha was a sage academic, not only au courant in the field but also steeped in European cultural history and philosophy. She had master's and doctoral degrees in both German and English from Stanford. She knew Kant, Hegel, Marx, and the notorious Frankfurt school—in the original German and in English translation. She was a materialist cultural historian and a debunker of what she'd called in her then [latest book](#) "the cult of authorship."

[Cultural Criticism](#) was a primer in "theory" and cultural studies. It started with the Frankfurt school, the group of German Jewish intellectuals who founded the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research at Goethe University in 1923, then fled Nazi Germany in 1933. Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse emigrated to the United States and took refuge at Columbia University and later at UC Berkeley and elsewhere. Their writing inaugurated two fields of study—critical theory and media studies. Theory also included [postmodern theory](#), including [poststructuralism](#) and [deconstruction](#)