Libertarian escapism

Ben Hourigan asks, does the popularity of TV anti-heroes point to a latent libertarianism?

Are you depressed by smoking cigarettes from a brown packet? Upset that the cops gave your teenage daughter a fine for not wearing a bike helmet? Try television! Its new, gentler formula is designed to ease the indigestion that comes from swallowing too much of the Nanny State's omnipresent, meddling goodwill.

Sure, television as it was in the twentieth century might prove grating to those who hold to a libertarian ethos. It robs you of control over your time, since you have to follow the broadcaster's schedule. Want to see the six o'clock news? It's at six o'clock: be in front of the screen or you'll miss it. Oh, and did I mention that the bulk of broadcast TV—infotainment, soaps, sitcoms and police procedurals—is repetitive and vacuous?

Fortunately, there's a new tradition of what we could call 'high television': series heavy on character development that deliver season-long story arcs and high production values. Often produced for US cable, it's more likely that viewers consume these shows when and where they please, from a DVD box set, by download on a phone or tablet, or, in the culturally privileged United States, on Netflix or Hulu.

Outside the US, series like Dexter, Californication, and Mad Men pass from hand to hand through digital piracy, in anarchic mockery of the media industry's slowness to embrace simultaneous global releases.

Quite aside from the more self-directed consumption habits it affords, a section of the new high television is disproportionately preoccupied with fantasies of a life beyond what we assume is the typical surrender to law and convention.

Consider, as an extreme example, Dexter, hero of the series that bears his name. Dexter is a serial killer, doomed by a drive to kill that his policeman foster-father channelled into virtue by way of the 'code' he holds to. Dexter's victims murder the innocent, and guilty themselves, we are inclined to believe they deserve to be Dexter's prey.

In an episode of season two, Dexter—who is also a blood-splatter analyst for the Miami police—investigates a murder scene at a comic book store, where...
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In representing a fulfilment of our human potential, embracing freedom rather than fleeing from it by obeying an external authority that contradicts our own choices.

Unlike the simpering nice guy who accedes to others’ plans for him, the self-determined person seeks to live by their own lights, dignifying themselves in the process. We endorse and envy the bad guy, even as we suspect that we should not hold him up as an example to others, because we know not every killer is restrained by Dexter’s code, and not every pretender and seducer has Draper’s mostly-reliable sense of duty to those in his sphere of influence. The free person is not only a hero: they can also be a menace.

As a personal and political credo, then, should libertarianism be something like a secret doctrine? Should we pass it hand-to-hand only amongst initiated and deemed responsible enough to receive the teaching?

The mass nature of television as a medium that plays host to these fantasies of a life beyond the law indicates a libertarianism of even the most moderately anti-state variety is usually founded on the relativist egalitarian opinion that each individual, no matter how meagre their talents or their intellect, is usually in the best position to decide how to look after their own welfare. The widespread popularity of the modern-day fantasies we’re talking about suggests that this is, actually, a broadly held opinion.

And it’s one that’s been held by economists, as well. As Friedrich Hayek argued in defence of the price mechanism in A Road to Serfdom, governments can’t make better decisions about economic matters than individuals can, because they’re not in possession of the same local knowledge. Not, in spite of their pretensions to the contrary—can governments reliably decide what’s good for you and for those whom they do not look after? For while every known a kid whose parents skimmed on their food budget because their money went on highly-taxed cigarettes and alcohol, you may rightly question that the Nanny State knows what’s best.

Back on the fictional level, think how much the complex ecosystem of Don Draper’s agency, family, and social circle would suffer if the law ever unravelled his deception. The same, to a lesser extent, goes for Nancy in Weeds. Dexter’s murders save the lives of numerous innocents, and even Eric Northman’s amoral interest supports a lively underground economy. These

fictions suggest that life, and economic activity, are too complex to subject to the blunt instruments of government power.

Let us compare, at last, that television antithesis of ours who it is the most problematic to endorse—Dexter—with a filmic parallel. The recent Australian movie Snowtown fictionalizes the murders carried out by Adelaide serial killer John Bunting and his collaborators in the 1990s. Like the world’s of Dexter, Snowtown’s charismatic Bunting paints killing as vigilante justice. But Bunting, unlike Dexter, is repulsive. And it’s not just that he lives in a context of suburban poverty and squalor, while Dexter is near and affluent. It is, predominantly, that Bunting’s justification is revealed as a sham in the scene where, devoid of self-doubt but merely enraptured by the suffering of his victim, we see him and his closest accomplice torture and kill a teenage boy. To keep Dexter a fit (anti)hero for normal people steeped in human sympathy, but wary of the claims of law and state to encompass the whole of life, the show chooses to have him remain a true psychopath: he must take on human sympathies and duties, view himself at times with distaste, and follow a moral code. Like Pinocchio, Dexter at last becomes a real boy.

The fine line between lawlessness born out of a higher sense of justice, and mere animalistic brutishness, makes libertarianism a hard doctrine to bring into the face of the public and is dedicated to the spirit of
a robust ideology rather than the unchecked exercise of a narcissistic’s desires—it must have some genuine moral foundation outside of mere self-interest.

We might return to the old ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’ Or we can paraphrase Kant, ‘do something only if you can wish that others would do the same.’ Nancy of Weeds is unattractive when she is a hypocrite, dealing drugs herself but telling her son not to do the same. It’s her uneasiness with the life that she’s adopted and her unwillingness to endorse it for others—not that she breaks the law—that most powerfully makes us wonder if she’s really doing wrong after all.

The libertarian lifestyle, then, must be built of the parts of our own freedom that we would wish on others. There’s a three-pronged set of values that underlies the life of the righteous, freedom-loving person, and though they can be extended to all, they may yet set one apart.

First, the libertarian adheres to their own judgment. Like Dexter, they trust their own sense of justice, and like Nancy and Don, they seize the opportunities that present themselves, particularly if they believe they have no other choice in order to protect their interests and those around them.

Second, they strive for self-ownership, and self-sufficiency. To follow your own judgment and let your potential rein, you need space, and must avoid being overly beholden to others. Dexter keeps his apartment, Nancy grows her own weed and Don starts his own advertising agency. This is the part of the libertarian ethos that makes a virtue of property rights and entrepreneurship. It’s a nice side-effect that they enrich whole societies, not just individuals.

Finally, the libertarian accepts that they and others are entitled only to the freedom compatible with the freedom of all. It’s what protects us against condemning wholesale murder, corporate endangerment of the environment or of human life, and repressive, life-hating religious dictatorships in less-enlightened countries. This is the libertarian’s version of the golden rule. Only by accepting it do we get to say openly, with Thoreau, that our ‘only obligation … is to do at any time what I think right.’

In an attempt to compensate Australian households for the proposed carbon tax, the Gillard government has proposed increasing the tax-free threshold in Australia’s personal income tax system.

This proposal is fraught with economic and political problems. Basic economics teaches us increases in the tax-free threshold tend to be accompanied by higher marginal rates elsewhere in the system, so that tax revenue does not fall by too much. This is a well known characteristic of the current system. Current statutory rates are shown in Table 1 below. Including the low income tax offset (LITO), the effective tax-free threshold under the current system is $16,000, which is more than double the statutory threshold of $6,000. In other words, courtesy of the LITO, Australia already has a high tax-free threshold.

This high threshold tends to result in high marginal rates elsewhere. For example, the LITO is currently worth $1,500, but once a taxpayer’s income reaches $30,000, it is reduced at a rate of four cents in the dollar. This means that those earning between $30,001 and $67,000 currently face effective marginal tax rates (EMTRs) that are four percentage points higher than the relevant statutory tax rates. These high EMTRs distort incentives and reduce economic efficiency.

Overall, the Gillard government’s proposed changes will make these problems worse: for more than one fifth of taxpayers, the proposed changes will increase EMTRs and exacerbate existing distortions. The proposed new statutory rates and effective marginal tax rates are

### Table 1: Current statutory marginal tax rates

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<th>Income Level</th>
<th>Statutory Rate</th>
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