

Free Markets Made Charlie Brown and Snoopy Possible



Blake Scott Ball (<https://www.aier.org/people/blake-scott-ball/>) – March 2,

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So many of our criticisms of Marxist practice revolve around its devastatingly bad outcomes for standards of living. There's good reason for this. In the early 1960s, somewhere between 15 and 50 million people (we cannot know exactly how many because communist states do not permit free and open inquiry of government records) starved to death in Mao's so-called "Great Leap Forward." The Soviet record was hardly any better. Stalin's Holodomor in Depression-era Ukraine, a centrally planned agricultural plan that led to historic famine in one of eastern Europe's most fertile regions, killed about 13 percent of the Ukrainian population, the first in a long line of Russian transgressions against Ukraine that regrettably continue to this day. The material outcomes and the resulting costs in human life of state-planned economies are criminal.

Free markets economics, on the other hand, unleashed the productive power of modern man. Free societies like the United States did far more than simply excel at providing for the basic material needs of their own people (and many millions more beyond their borders). These societies provided for the full flourishing of the human experience, including cultural life. There is perhaps no greater example of the incredible cultural benefits of the free market than the historic success of Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*.

On its face, newspaper comic strips like *Peanuts* were entirely disposable. Schulz himself (with no small hint of Charlie-Brown-like melancholy and pessimism), wondered whether it could even be considered art. It was what some critics might call "throwaway culture." No centrally planned economy would have ever approved the resources necessary to let a cartoonist devote nearly 50 years to the daily reflections and misadventures of Charlie Brown and his quirky beagle, Snoopy. For that matter, no cultural critic picking winners and losers on the comics pages of the *Washington Post* or *Chicago Tribune* in fall 1950 would have guessed that Schulz's offbeat little strip would ascend to the heights of modern pop art. Simply put, only the market knew.

Schulz's *Peanuts* helped to bring levity, self-reflection, and profound insight to the mundane challenges of everyday life in Cold War America. At some of the darkest times in the late twentieth century, *Peanuts* gave readers comforting assurance that they were not alone in life's struggles, as they watched Charlie Brown take another try at kicking the football or flying his kite. It was the same resolve they had to exercise to overcome their own failings and shortcomings in pursuit of a better future for themselves and their children. The televised *Peanuts* holiday specials yearly united tens of millions of families of all backgrounds around ideals of friendship, community, and shared tradition. Snoopy, Lucy, Linus, and Pig-Pen regularly brought cheer and comfort to those celebrating a milestone or enduring a time of hardship, through countless Hallmark greeting cards.

But *Peanuts* did far more than that. It challenged the social structures that still limited women's access to the public sector with Lucy's becoming a vocal advocate and universal symbol for women's liberation, even appearing on the cover of *Ms.* Magazine. It criticized the human costs of the Vietnam War through the escapades of the World War I Flying Ace and his disastrous battles with the Red Baron. Little wonder that the Flying Ace became the symbol of "short-timers" soon to be returning home from their tour of duty. *Peanuts* called for the full racial integration of American life with the introduction of an African-American friend and classmate, Franklin, at a time when almost no one else in mass media would touch the subject. And it served as a beacon of representation for lesbian women and other sexual minorities in the complex and nuanced relationship between Peppermint Patty and Marcy at a time when sexual discrimination was rampant.

How do we know that a silly little comic strip had such a grand effect on American life? For one, it made Charles Schulz astoundingly rich. Audiences responded to Schulz's work by spending billions of dollars of their hard-earned money to consume his work. At the height of *Peanuts'* appeal, one of every two Americans started their day with Schulz's comic strip. Even more than 20 years after Schulz's passing, his estate is only surpassed by Elvis and Michael Jackson. But even more, we know of *Peanuts'* incredible effect because the readers and viewers told us. Thanks to the unprecedented affluence of Cold War America, regular people had the literacy, material means, and freedom to write to cartoonist Charles Schulz and share how much his work meant to them in times of both joy and mourning. Tens of thousands of those letters are still archived in the Charles M. Schulz Museum and Research Center today.

None of this would have been possible outside of a liberal free market society. Creations like *Peanuts* are an essential part of human flourishing. As a great Western philosopher once said, "Man does not live by bread alone." Our material needs are essential, of course. But humanity needs more to live a full life.

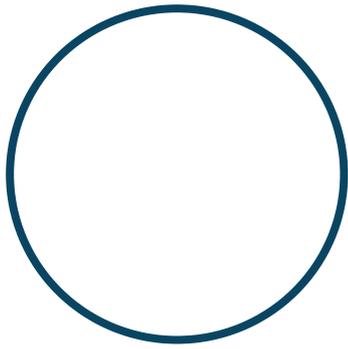
We need the imagination of Snoopy. We need the romance of Sally in pursuit of her beloved “Babbo,” Linus. We need the joys of success and the lessons of defeat on the baseball field with Charlie Brown.

For humanity to flourish, we must be free to explore our full selves. Charles Schulz’s *Peanuts* gave us that every day for 50 years, and it would never have happened without the free market.

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