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A Defense of the Freedom to Be Left Alone

Boston Anarchist Drinking Brigade

November 1991

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We live in an invasive society. Our freedom to peacefully lead our lives as we please is severely restricted by laws, rules, and regulations instituted by governments of all sorts and their supporters among the populace. We are subject to a huge number of laws, among which are laws that: outlaw certain forms of consensual sex; ban public nudity; restrict the sale or production of sexually explicit books and films; criminalize the sale of sexual favors; prohibit ownership of handguns; require us to get notes from a physician to buy certain medicines; prevent us from seeking the assistance of another in ending our own lives; fine us for not wearing seatbelts; and attempt to prevent us from using the recreational drugs of our choice. Why do people tolerate such a level of government interference in their personal lives? Because they have been convinced that individuals and society need to be protected from the consequences of "bad" choices people might make if they were left alone.

Governments presume that they know better what is good for others than do those people themselves. These rulers seem to think that when other people make choices that they con-

sider unwise, unhealthy, or immoral, those people are misbehaving because they are either uninformed, stupid, or physically, psychologically, or morally diseased. The state then feels justified in stepping in to prevent the "unenlightened" from harming themselves. These busybodies fail to see that other people can freely choose to engage in activities of which they disapprove.

People like different things and have different ideas about how to lead their lives. Some prefer heterosex, some homosexual, some both, some neither. Some like coffee and cigarettes, others vodka and cocaine. Some prefer to have physicians tell them how to stay or get healthy and what medicines to take, others would prefer non-medical healers or wish to make their own choice about what drugs they wish to use. Some choose to engage in sex for free, while others are willing to pay for or sell sexual favors. These activities are the result of freely made choices and no one is affected by any of them except the individuals who voluntarily engage in them. Therefore, they should not be the business of anyone but the participants and should not be interfered with by others.

People sometimes engage in activities that are potentially harmful to them because the pleasure or benefit they derive or hope to derive from the activity is more important to them than the actual or potential harm the activity may cause them. People smoke tobacco despite the increase in lung cancer and emphysema risk associated with it because of the pleasure they get from smoking. Some people engage in sexual activity, like cocksucking without condoms, which carries some risk of causing HIV infection, because the sexual pleasure they obtain is worth the small risk of being infected and perhaps developing AIDS. Such choices should be left entirely up to the individual, since no one else is harmed. We should be free to live our lives as we please, even if we make some decisions that turn out to have been unwise.

Some voluntary activities are prohibited or regulated because they have the potential to involve others involuntarily. Since guns can be used to kill others, the argument is made that gun ownership should be regulated to prevent possible harm to others. Some harmed by guns deserve to be harmed, as when gun owners are defending themselves or their property, but sometimes innocent others are harmed by gun owners. The fact that non-invasive people are sometimes injured or killed when guns are freely available, however, does not justify restricting their availability. Non-coercive people are also sometimes hurt or die in car accidents, but few, if any, advocate banning cars for this reason. Just because a gun or car can be misused to hurt someone who has not injured the owner does not justify banning it.

Supporters of interventionist governments would argue that no or little risk is acceptable in society. However, the problem with this outlook is that lowering risk means restricting freedom. A society that values freedom will necessarily be a society which allows people the freedom to engage in risky behavior. We must make a choice: either a free, somewhat risky world, or a safe and secure, but stifling and unfree one.

Politicians of all political tendencies, rightists and leftists alike, support government intervention in other people's lives. Conservatives and conventional liberals may be more crass and open about their interventionism, but they hold no monopoly on it. The socialist left is perfectly willing to interfere with the affairs of others, and the socialist states have an even worse record than the united states when it comes to restrictions on individual freedom. Few leftists criticize the prescription system or laws against recreational drug use, for instance, and the socialist states are notorious for persecuting people who engage in homosexual sex.

No government of any sort, no matter what its size or political orientation, will leave people alone. The nature and mission of government is to interfere with free individuals and tell

them how they should live their lives. We will only be truly and completely free when people finally decide that they can live better and more freely without any government and begin the process of building a stateless society.