

George Monbiot Gets it Ass-Backward

Kevin Carson

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Monbiot's misapprehension is summarized perfectly by the subtitle of his article: "Climate change's unprecedented moral challenge demands that we restrict market freedom." Unfortunately, his understanding of what "market freedom" entails leaves something to be desired:

Adam Smith held that market freedom was desirable for one reason: that it improved people's lives. Where he perceived that it had the opposite effect, he called for restraint. "Those exertions of the natural liberty of a few individuals, which might endanger the security of the whole society, are, and ought to be, restrained by the laws of all governments," he wrote. Governments have "the duty of protecting, as far as possible, every member of the society from the injustice or oppression of every other member of it".

Such warnings were of course ignored. Sixty years later, John Clare surveyed the devastation wrought by the new liberties. "Thus came enclosure – ruin was its guide / But freedom's clapping hands enjoyed the sight / Though comfort's cottage soon was thrust aside / And workhouse prisons raised upon the site."

Although his identification of the free market with enclosures and workhouses is echoed by vulgar libertarian apologists for the dark satanic mills, they were about as far from any genuine principle of free markets as it's possible to get. The enclosures were a state-imposed robbery, in which the working population was relieved of most of the arable land. The workhouses, appropriately called prisons, were a way of imposing forced labor on the surplus population. This population was prevented by the Laws of Settlement (a virtual internal passport system) from migrating to parishes where labor in demand. At first glance, this might appear to cause hardship to factory owners, who were located mainly in labor-poor areas; but fortunately for them, the government conducted what amounted to slave labor markets, auctioning off children from the workhouses of overpopulated parishes and shipping them like cattle to the factories of the industrial districts of the North and West. To call this "market freedom," a term properly reserved for voluntary agreements between free and equal parties, is positively perverse; it is understandable, though, given the kind of pro-corporate and pro-sweatshop apologetic that usually passes for "libertarian" commentary these days. The worst enemies of real free markets are the people who use the term most.

One of the evil effects of present-day “market freedom” that Monbiot objects to is the doubling, in the 1990s, of CO2 emissions from airline flights by UK residents. Monbiot makes the remarkable assertion that “[o]nly government intervention could put us back on course..” It’s remarkably *wrong*, given the fact that civil aviation is almost entirely a creation of the state. Airports were created with taxpayer money and eminent domain, and (in the U.S., at least) the FAA’s air traffic control infrastructure operated largely on general revenues through the 1970s. Even today, were the civil aviation system deprived of eminent domain and of taxpayer seed-money, there just wouldn’t *be* any new airports. There also wouldn’t be any large civilian aircraft, except as a spinoff of the Cold War. The aircraft industry was spiralling into the red after the post-WWII demobilization, until Truman’s heavy bomber program rescued it. And the production runs from jumbo jets alone would not have been long enough to pay for the expensive machine tools required for producing them, without the production of heavy military aircraft. So we must add to Monbiot’s sins of perversity his use of the term “market freedom” in relation to, of all things, a spinoff of the military-industrial complex.

It is not just that we are free to kill other people; market freedom constrains us to do so. The economy is so organised as to make it almost impossible to do the right thing. If your village isn’t served by public transport and there is nowhere safe to cycle, you have, for all the talk of freedom to drive, no choice. If the superstores have shut down all the small shops, you must give your money to a company whose purchasing and distribution networks look like a plan for maximum environmental impact.

So what on earth does our state capitalist economy have to do with “market freedom”? How anyone can observe the over-reliance on transportation and energy resources in the present economy, entirely the result of state subsidies to the consumption of transportation and energy, and call it an ill effect of “market freedom,” is beyond me. The radical monopoly of the automobile, air freight, and long-distance shipping is the result of government transportation subsidies. Subsidies to transportation have the primary effect of increasing the distance between things, and rendering decentralized local alternatives unusable.

We can deal with climate change only with the help of governments, restraining the exertions of our natural liberties.

This is surely about as close as it’s possible for any human being to come to saying the direct opposite of the truth—except, perhaps, for referring to Chancellor Gordon Brown as “the man who keeps the markets free.” Climate change is the direct result of government-created externality, with the taxpayers absorbing the grossly excessive distribution costs of a centralized corporate economy. That’s the central function of government under state capitalism: to subsidize the operating expenses of big business, so that its inefficiency and bloated size are made artificially profitable, and it is kept artificially competitive against more efficient firms engaged in decentralized production for local markets.

The neoliberal apologists for corporate power and the apologists for the regulatory-welfare state have, between them, managed to steal the term “free market” and deface it beyond recognition. As Albert Nock commented decades ago, “laissez-faire” is an impostor-term cynically misused by both the apologists for big business and the apologists for big government. It is in

their joint interest to pretend that the present corporate economy grew out of a free market, and that only government intervention can restrain corporate power (when in fact it could not survive, and would not exist in the first place, without government intervention). Those of us who hate mercantilism and privilege need to take back the term “free market” from these swine, and restore it to the proper revolutionary meaning it had before it was appropriated by the apologists for ill-gotten wealth.

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