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On Breaking Your Legs and Giving You Crutches

Responses to a Liberal

Kevin Carson

11 September 2012

The questions below, which I received from a liberal curious about left-libertarianism, are fairly typical. The common thread running through the left-libertarian response is that most of the evils currently remedied by the state result from state intervention in the first place.

1. If government provided no safety net for the poor, what would happen to the 100+ million Americans with an IQ under 90, to the millions of Americans who can't work because of cancer, heart disease, etc., to even the millions with graduate degrees who can't find a job, and to America as a country?

Government policies increase the basic threshold of subsistence for the worst off enormously, making comfortable poverty impossible (see, for example, Charles Johnson, "Scratching By,"

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The Freeman, December 2007). If government didn't enforce absentee title to vacant and unimproved land against "squatters," building codes whose main economic effect is to criminalize cheap vernacular building technologies or new low-cost/high-efficiency techniques the incumbent contractors don't want to compete with, licensing regimes that impede independent production by unlicensed cabs, home daycare and the like, there would be a huge reduction in the marginal cost of both survival and comfortable subsistence. As I mention below, these same forms of exploitation drastically reduce the material resources and leisure available to working people for developing their own self-organized solidaristic safety net.

2. If this room were filled with chronically unemployed people: people with IQs under 90, who are old and/or with severe heart disease or cancer, how would you explain to them that you oppose a government safety net: No unemployment, subsidized housing, health care, or public transportation?

Government policies (like those mentioned above) promote inflation of land values, and make housing more expensive by restrictions on building techniques. Subsidized housing is a way of ameliorating the most destabilizing effects of this for the worst off, without killing the golden goose for the politically connected real estate industry. Since the subsidies go directly to the real estate folks, they're making money at both ends.

Healthcare costs are jacked up by all sorts of artificial scarcity rents and privileges.

Subsidized public transportation would be far less necessary if subsidized monoculture and sprawl didn't first make cars a necessity and make feet and bikes useless.

3. In the pre-industrial age, it was possible for most willing workers to find sustainable employment. But in the information age, being willing isn't enough. In the modern era, can you point to one of the world's 200 nations that have no government-mandated safety net and yet doesn't have huge numbers of people living painfully destitute lives while others live in grandeur?

The very concept of “sustainable employment” reflects an economic model created by the state in the first place. Much of the current dichotomy between grandeur and destitution reflects scarcity rents on forms of artificial property enforced by the state. The mass-production industrial model, where product-specific capital assets are extremely expensive so that only the rich can afford to buy them and then hire people for wages, is something the state had a huge role in creating. As we see a technological shift toward lower-cost, general-purpose capital assets (essentially a reversal of the shift from affordable craftsmen's tools to expensive machinery that resulted in the wage/factory system in the first place), much of the rationale behind dependence on wage labor will disappear. The lower the cost of subsistence, and the lower the capital outlay for becoming a producer, the more blurry the boundary between being employed/in business and unemployed/out of business will become. And the lower the costs of subsistence and the lower the costs of capital equipment for self-provisioning in the informal sector, the more the share of total provisioning that will shift from wage labor to the informal sector.

4. Eliminating a safety net for the poor is an experiment unproven in modern society. The government-mandated safety net is certainly not a model of cost-efficiency but are you willing to take the risk that if we eliminate it, we won't

end up with a society in which our children will see people on the streets dying of starvation or with cancer writhing in agony?

Writers like Kropotkin and E.P. Thompson describe elaborate self-organized safety nets — cooperatives, mutuals, friendly societies, etc. — created by workers for themselves. These met a huge volume of needs. But their effectiveness was limited by the fact that they existed in a society — like ours — of privilege and artificial property rights. The effectiveness of the self-organized welfare state was limited by the resources of an exploited class. In a freed market, where labor is not burdened by such parasitic rent extraction by the privileged, the working class would have a lot more resources to devote to a mutual/cooperative welfare state.

In general, artificial scarcities and artificial property rights are the main source of the overclass's ill-gotten wealth, and the main reason for the underclass's poverty. Government systematically redistributes income upward to the classes that control it. The welfare state is a way of giving just enough of it back to the hardest-hit to prevent destabilizing levels of homelessness and starvation from imperiling the system.