



Libertarianism, “I’m Alright, Jack”, the Free Market and Pandemics

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Something that I have noticed about libertarians is that they invariably seem to be people who have everything alright, thank you very much. It just so happens that their health is fine and they have a pretty good job. Many of them are comfortably middle class, and those who are working class are often convinced by anti-(scary-)government propaganda. But they are almost always healthy and employed.

Because libertarianism is individualism qua selfishness. Libertarianism is about looking after number one. As soon as someone needs help, some form of collectivism is invoked. Okay, sometimes help can be afforded by family members or close in-group members. But, realistically, if someone really needs help, and if they are not one of society’s lucky ones – born into money and property – then they will need help from some form of collectivism, especially when you zoom out to look at things from a society level. It is too piecemeal to expect families and even out-group members to pick up the tabs unless this is strategically organised at a societal and governmental level.

In this debate, Mitch McConnell, without any decent rationale, attempts to paint McGrath into a corner because she, heaven forfend, expects the government to take care of healthcare. Well, yeah:

When you have negative externalities (costs to third parties in the production of a good, such as lung disease for smokers or cleaning up a river polluted by coal sludge), and health is one of those sectors (along with the environment) that suffers the most here, the free market just cannot morally arbitrate.

Let’s take another look at the free market being utterly ill-equipped to deal, in any kind of libertarian sense, with healthcare issues.

The pandemic.

Lots of ink has already been spilled on this from both sides. I already wrote this piece: **“Socialism Is Evil”; Yeah, Not a Good Time to Be a Libertarian!** right at the start of this.

As a political and economic system, libertarianism simply cannot deal with a global pandemic. It cannot strategise and therein lies your problem. It is reactive not proactive. Indeed, it would turn out being a very literal survival of the fittest.

When UK libertarian MP Steve Baker rubber-stamped the government’s massive stimulus package months back, he stated:

“Libertarian though I may be, this is the right thing to do but, my goodness, we ought not to allow this situation to endure one moment longer than is absolutely necessary to save lives and preserve jobs.... We are implementing tonight in this bill at least a dystopian society.”

As The Independent **reported** in discussing this tension:

“Preventing the spread of infectious disease is within the legitimate functions of the minimal state, which most libertarians accept,” says Michael Huemer, a professor of philosophy at the University of Colorado.

“The minimal state’s functions include protecting people from physical threats posed by other people,” Mr Huemer says. “That includes not only behaviour that definitely causes physical harm, but also behaviour that creates an unreasonable risk of harm to others. Obviously, what is an unreasonable risk is a matter of judgment.”

In Washington, David Boaz, executive vice president of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, says: “I wouldn’t say we have trouble holding on to libertarian principles. We believe in the presumption of liberty. But that presumption can be overcome in particular circumstances. And that’s part of our understanding of liberty.”

Which is a euphemism for consequentialism and admitting that libertarianism doesn’t work in times of crisis. War, pandemic, environmental catastrophe, global recession, etc. etc. Or, the sorts of things that countries face on a continual basis in one form or another.

What this shows is exactly what I was talking about at the beginning: libertarianism is fine for those who are okay, who have it fine, but when the shit hits the fan, no one wants to be a libertarian. This works in the same way for a country as it does for an individual who has broken his leg and can’t work, and thus can’t afford work, can’t rehabilitate and can’t get back to work unless there are regulations and healthcare in place to allow for this. The country’s scenario, such as with the pandemic, is just an upscaled version of the individual scenario.

That’s not to say the libertarian right isn’t **seeking to profit from the pandemic**, it is, as we have seen from the global stripping back of environmental legislation and so on.