



Hating Free Enterprise

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Why are so many people so hostile to free markets?

Markets provide miracles that we take for granted. Clean, well-lighted supermarkets sell 30,000 products. Starvation has largely vanished from countries where private property and economic freedom are permitted. Free markets have rescued more people from poverty than government ever has.

And yet, when innovators propose extending this benign power, people shriek in fear.

This was clear reading The Wall Street Journal not long ago.

The "Letters" section led with complaints about Bob Poole's column on well-maintained private highways that keep traffic moving. One writer complained that such highways exist for "the privileged ... who can

afford surprisingly large ... fees ... to drive a very boring 45 minutes around metropolitan Toronto. Highway 407 is certainly a great success – for its bondholders."

Surprisingly large fees? Only if you are clueless about what you pay for "free" roads. And why is success for the bondholders a bad thing? Is the writer envious? If the ride is boring, he doesn't need to take it. No one forces anyone to use a private highway. Why do so many begrudge the successes that voluntary private exchanges bring?

That same day's Journal also included a story on the "radical" idea of kidney selling.

Why is selling an organ "radical"? Banning the sale of kidneys kills thousands of people a year. That should be considered "radical."

Today, 74,000 Americans wait for kidney transplants while enduring painful, exhausting and expensive hours hooked up to dialysis machines. The machines are technological miracles that keep many alive, but dialysis is not nearly as good as a real kidney. Every day, about 17 Americans die while waiting for a transplant.

Yet plenty of Americans would give up a kidney if they could just be paid for their trouble and risk. Ruth Sparrow of St. Petersburg, Fla., ran a newspaper ad saying: "Kidney, runs good, \$30,000 or best offer." She told "20/20" that she got a couple of serious calls, but then the newspaper refused to run her ad again, warning her that she might be arrested.

Why isn't someone with two healthy organs allowed to put one on the market? Because in 1984, U.S. Rep. Al Gore sponsored a law making the sale of organs punishable by five years in jail. Congress couldn't contain its enthusiasm; the bill passed 396 to 6.

So giving someone a kidney is a good deed, but selling the same kidney is a felony.

When I confronted Dr. Brian Pereira of the National Kidney Foundation about that, he said, "The current system functions extremely well." I asked him how the system could be working "extremely well" when 17 people die every day because they

can't get kidneys. He said that the "desperate (situation) doesn't justify an unwise policy decision."

The Kidney Foundation fears that poor people would be "exploited." But what gives the foundation the right to decide for poor people? The poor are as capable as others of deciding what trade-offs to make in life. No one forces them to give up an organ. To say the poor are too desperate to resist a dangerous temptation is patronizing.

But gatekeepers like Dr. Pereira say there should be "no barter, no sale of organs. That's where we have to step in." When I asked him who that "we" is that has the right to "step in," he replied, "The government (and) the professional societies."

That conceit — that the government and "professional societies" must decide for all of us, and the underlying hostility toward commerce — kills people.

Money shouldn't make giving up an organ suspect. As one kidney patient told me before he died, "The doctors make money, the hospitals make money, the organ procurement organizations make money. Everybody gets something except for the donor!"

If you think it's immoral to sell an organ, don't do it. But sick people shouldn't have to die because some people despise markets.

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