

“One man’s gain is another’s loss.”

THE LAW OF THE JUNGLE decrees that might makes right, that one man’s gain is another’s loss, that to the victor belong the spoils. This is the law that governs when disputes or differences flare to the point of all-out war, or in any contest where the outcome depends upon physical force: for every winner there is a loser.

There is a certain merit to this law which governs the processes of evolution, natural selectivity, survival of the fittest, and the emergence of human beings among competing forms of life. But the very idea of being human gives rise to revulsion at the seeming cruelty of “Nature, red in tooth and claw.” Man, because he is human, seeks to improve his own well-being and to resolve disputes by means other than brute force, sheer strength of numbers, or struggle to the death of at least one of the combatants. Justice tempered with mercy is the essence of humanity.

There is no doubt about the severity of the competitive struggle in Nature. And awareness of this fact leads some persons to conclude that competition always works the same way – that for every winner there must be a loser. Yet, even in Nature are to be found various forms of “mutual aid” and many rules of behavior which modify the competitive struggle, as when members of a herd cooperate with one another in defense against a common enemy.

Man, especially, has adopted humane rules of competition. Competitive sports, as we know them, are tests of skill and stamina to pick a winner but not the bloody and deadly games of yore; even the losers in modern sports are expected to survive.

Nevertheless, in a world of some

three billion human beings – with limited supplies of land, tools, and other resources needed or wanted for survival and human betterment – the competitive struggle persists. And men are far from agreeing on what rules should govern it.

In some parts of the world, the rule may still be “every man for himself” – the old law of the jungle. But in most of the so-called civilized world, there are various man-made attempts to modify that law.

In many countries, the rule is “from each according to ability, to each according to need,” the compulsory socialist formula based on the view that the individual human being is and ought to be subordinate to the will of the ruling majority.

Elsewhere, and to the extent that some societies are not wholly committed to socialism, a private enterprise type of competition is practiced. One of the important rules of competitive private enterprise is that each peaceful individual is entitled to choose how he will use his time and talents; his right to life is respected. A corollary rule concerns the private ownership and control of property, as distinguished from the socialistic idea of “ownership in common” – which works out in practice, control by the governing class. Private ownership respects the right of the finder, creator, buyer, or otherwise lawful possessor of scarce resources to use such property according to his own choice. Consistent with the foregoing rules respecting life, liberty, and property are the practices of specialization (division of labor, according to each person’s peculiar talents) and voluntary exchange (a willing buyer and a willing

seller trading to mutual advantage).

It is important to note and remember that a free-market exchange economy – where each person chooses how to utilize his time and talents and property, and trades if he pleases with anyone else who is willing – rests squarely and essentially on the private ownership and control of one’s own person (no slavery) and one’s own property (no robbery or confiscation). Except as a person owns and controls a service or commodity (private property) he could not possibly offer it in exchange and make good the delivery.

Despite the fact that voluntary exchange is the only manner in which production and distribution of scarce goods and resources can be accomplished without coercion of any participant, there are nonetheless those who miss that vital point and who insist that competitive private enterprise is inhumane, that it is without sympathy for the weak, that some are poor only because others are rich, that one man’s gain necessarily measures another’s loss. They fail to see that when an exchange is voluntary, then both parties must gain from the transaction – or at least think they have – else they would not willingly make the trade. The gain of one is possible only because the others with whom he trades also see gains for themselves.

With minor exceptions, no doubt, those who reap the greatest gains or profits from competitive private enterprise and free-market exchange are those with the best showing of satisfied customers. The more efficiently one produces and offers goods or services – the better able he is to hold quality

up and costs down – the more likely are his customers to shower him with profits. Since the great majority of the potential customers in any society are the comparatively poor, it follows that many of the largest fortunes from business enterprise fall to those who have cut costs sufficiently to make their wares attractive to the masses of the comparatively poor. And the ones who lose out or fail in the competitive drive for satisfied customers are most likely to be the ones who could not or would not serve the poor. It takes no socialistic government to reprimand and punish such ineptitude; open competition attends to that.

The socialist critics of competitive private enterprise, on grounds that it allows some to gain at the expense of others, obviously do not understand. For if they could understand, they would realize that socialism – despite its humanitarian, share-the-wealth appeal – does precisely what they deplore: it insists that some must lose what others are to gain. That is why socialism has to be compulsory. Every variation of the “welfare state” in the world today is but a crude reversion to the ruthless law of the jungle: might makes right, one man’s gain is another’s loss, to the victor belong the spoils.

The better alternative is competitive private enterprise and voluntary exchange – the only economic “game” that allows every player to win, the only social system that affords the maximum of true voluntary charity, and the only political concept consistent with the belief that individuals are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.”

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