

Privatization?—It Doesn't Go Far Enough!

BAD Broadside #17

It is fashionable for government officials from both major parties to give lip service to the problems associated with what they call “big government.” While they pass more laws, enact more regulations, increase the prison population, and extort more and more money from working people, they claim to favor “downsizing” the state. One of the measures often put forward as a way to accomplish this is privatization. Mass transit, hospitals, even prisons, are either being sold outright to private corporations, or are being managed by outside agencies while the government maintains ownership. While anarchists generally support getting more and more areas of our lives out of the hands of government, state-sponsored privatization does not, in fact, increase people’s autonomy, their ability to make individual decisions about how and where to obtain goods and services and how to live their lives.

Governments, for the most part, do a poor job of almost everything. Public agencies are inefficient, costly, and slow, and “services” are often delivered by rude and arrogant people. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that many state-run businesses are monopolies. There is little incentive to run a business better, deliver a better product, or treat customers well, if one doesn’t have to compete against other people engaged in the same trade. Privatization usually does not change this, since a company buying or managing a formerly public agency is generally given a monopoly in its area, just as the state had.

When governments privatize a public transportation system or its management, they don’t open up the market so anyone can compete and provide transportation services to willing customers. They simply let a private, for-profit, entity take over the existing, monopolistic, system and run it differently. They change some people at the top, which may result in more efficient or courteous services, but this doesn’t really let people choose very much more than they could before. They don’t let other privately-owned companies compete with the new owners or managers, by setting up new routes or challenging the official agency on established routes, letting the customer decide with whom they wish to do business. And they certainly don’t allow private individuals to use their trucks, cars, or other vehicles as buses to compete with the new owners or managers.

When a hospital is privatized, again there are changes, some of which may be for the better, but there is no substantive change in the way individuals interact with the health care system. The hospital will still be run by physicians, surgeons, nurses, and administrators certified by the government. People still can only see certain kinds of health care providers, use certain kinds of insurance, and remain unable to buy most medicines without a doctor’s or nurse’s prescription. Privatization of a public hospital does not mean people are now free to choose whatever kind of healer they prefer, take whatever medicine or substance they desire, or set up their own health care center or hospital without government approval and oversight.

Privatized prisons best show the minimal difference between a government-run agency, and one that has been turned over to a for-profit corporation. In these new privately-owned jails, prisoners are still abused, beaten, and raped, guards still run the smallest details of prisoners’ lives, and people continue to be locked up without their consent. Private prisons are the antithesis of private decision-making and private agreement, since the “customer,” in this case the prisoner, is not allowed to have any autonomous life, makes few personal decisions, and can not freely choose to stop doing business with the new company and leave. Additionally, for-profit prisons are totally dependent on the state to provide them with new “customers” by arresting and convicting people who have violated the laws created by various levels of government. Without government action there would be no prisoners, and therefore no prisons, public or private.

Anarchists value private decision-making and private voluntary agreements between individuals. We oppose government because it interferes with these activities of non-violent, non-coercive people. Privatization sounds appealing to some anarchists, because it holds out the hope of decreasing such state involvement and interference in people’s lives. But, while it does alter the way in which government interacts with individuals, it generally does not result in any increase in people’s freedom to choose how to live. It doesn’t give us more options, it often doesn’t provide better service, and it doesn’t stop government from reaching into our pockets to obtain the money to subsidize many of these new enterprises. And it certainly doesn’t decrease our taxes, since governments always find new ways to spend our money, even if privatization has resulted in some savings.

People should be free to produce and consume whatever they want, as long as they don’t interfere with others’ equal freedom to do so. If someone wants to transport people in their van in return for money, or a group of people wish to run a bus service, it should be no one’s business but that of the parties to the exchange. If someone wants to take penicillin or valium without getting a doctor’s note, or wishes to consult a medical school graduate before making health care decisions, both options should be available. True freedom, true private life, means the freedom to live however we like, making our own arrangements with other people when and if it suits us (and them). Only the complete abolition of government will truly “privatize” our lives. Government-sponsored privatization?—It doesn’t go far enough!

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