

Risky Business

BAD Broadside #13

Our daily activities are constantly interfered with or prohibited by innumerable laws, rules, and regulations. Our choices about where we want to live, what kind of work we want to do, how we want to raise our kids, and what kind of recreation we wish to enjoy are all restricted by the government and those who support government. Anarchists advocate a different kind of world: society without any government, a world where people are free to live as they please as long as they respect the freedom of others to do likewise. But the prospects for such a new society seem pretty dim in light of most people's enthusiastic support of government and its increasing control over our lives.

So many people seem so willing to give up their autonomy to the oversight of others, seeing this intervention as the price they must pay for a modicum of security in an otherwise unsafe world. They don't, however, seem to realize what they are giving up in their attempt to make their lives as risk-free as possible.

Risk reduction is certainly a reasonable goal, but risk elimination is an impossibility. Few of us want to get sick, injure ourselves, or die. Yet, many of life's activities, ranging from the most mundane to the most exciting, are fraught with risk, and one is put in the position of trying to balance one's desire to live a satisfying life with one's wish to avoid harm. Unfortunately, this attempt to balance our sometimes conflicting wants can lead to difficulties for both the individual concerned and for others.

If we all genuinely wished to avoid any danger we might encounter, the world would be quite a different place. No one would drive a car, use in-line skates, work in a hazardous occupation, have a cocktail, or smoke a cigarette or joint, since all of these activities carry a risk of harm to the person who does them. Most people, however, choose not to completely avoid all such activities, as the usefulness or pleasure of engaging in them outweighs the hazards involved. One can modify the risk by driving slowly, wearing protective gear, or drinking or smoking moderately. People make these kinds of decisions daily as they live and move in this uncertain world.

Sometimes the choices a person makes about what activities to engage in may seem foolish or overly cautious to others. For instance, some people at minimal risk of acquiring an HIV infection sexually, may swear off all sexual contacts, instead of simply choosing partners and/or sexual activities carefully. But, while such people may be unnecessarily restricting their activities and denying themselves pleasure, their activity has no effect on uninvolved others and should, therefore, be none of their concern.

Problems arise, however, when well-meaning, but overly cautious people decide to seek the assistance of governments to protect themselves and others from real or imagined risks. Government intervention then forces everyone to curtail their activities in accord with the wishes of the least daring and adventuresome among us. Laws regulating housing construction, requiring occupational and institutional licensure, and restricting sales of both therapeutic and recreational drugs, are all purportedly in place to protect us from harm. But they in fact not only result in housing shortages, homelessness, unnecessarily costly health care, crime, and unemployment, but also cause a general cultural and social impoverishment. When we cannot choose for ourselves what kind of home we want to live in, what kind of health care provider we wish to consult, who should care for our children, who can fix our hair, or what drugs we wish to take to cure us or entertain us, our lives are that much more limited, less interesting, less satisfying, and less free.

Many people become so used to government caretaking and supervision, that they see it as the only solution when bad things happen. Because people are occasionally hurt when using fireworks, many states totally ban sales to or use by individuals. And since some parents' irresponsibility led to injuries to children, there was an attempt in Massachusetts to make it illegal for any parent to leave any child under 14 unsupervised at any time. While there may appear to be some merit in these actions, the same rationale could be used to ban motor vehicles and suntanning. Is that the kind of safe, but dull and lifeless world we want?

Life is unsure, and sometimes unsafe. That is the human condition. But life can also be exciting and pleasurable. Some people are willing to give up a lot for a promise of security. That is fine as long as they don't also try to prevent others from taking chances. Some of us are unwilling to trade our freedom for security and would rather incur some risks while living our lives as we see fit. And those who don't approve should mind their own business, for a change.

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