



## Comment on the Commentary of the Day

by

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**Disclaimer: The following "Letters to the Editor" were sent to the respective publications on the dates indicated. Some were printed but many were not. The original articles that are being commented on may or may not be available on the internet and may require registration or subscription to access if they are. Some of the original articles are syndicated and therefore may have appeared in other publications also.**

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12 April 2009

Editor, Times of London

Sir:

American conservatives have their own reasons for opposing Barack Obama's gigantic agenda ("Right's rage at overbearing Obama," April 12). Some of these reasons are more sensible than others. But I offer here a deeper reason to worry about Mr. Obama's hyperactivity; it is a reason identified exactly 250 years ago by Adam Smith in his first book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

"That wisdom which contrived the system of human affections, as well as that of every other part of nature, seems to have judged that the interest of the great society of mankind would be best promoted by directing the principal attention of each individual to that particular portion of it, which was most within the sphere both of his abilities and of his understanding." [Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1976 [1759]), p. 375]

No person, regardless of I.Q. or office, can possibly possess more than an infinitesimal amount of the

knowledge of reality necessary for the successful carrying out of 'plans' such as those offered by Mr. Obama. Society best advances when each of us is free to pursue our own goals in our own ways, with government doing no more than protecting each of us from the predations and officious ambitions of others.

It is preposterous to suppose that Mr. Obama (or anyone else) can know enough to oversee the automobile industry and the banking industry, to lead the creation of "green jobs," to remake medical-care provision, and to do

any of the other ambitious tasks on his agenda. Each of those matters is light years outside of "the sphere both of his abilities and of his understanding."

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12 April 2009

Editor, Washington Post

Dear Editor:

E.J. Dionne rightly applauds the healthy state of religion in America ("A Resilient Christianity," April 12). But I wonder if Mr. Dionne ever stops to reflect that America's thriving religions are strong evidence against his often-expressed belief in the necessity of regulation by government.

Americans' principled commitment to the First Amendment means that the market for religion in America is arguably the freest market on earth. In the U.S., no religion receives government funding; every religion in America is funded exclusively with voluntary contributions. No religion is protected by government from the competition of other religions. No religion receives special privileges from government. No licensing requirements exist to thwart the creation of new religions or

churches. Similarly, no preacher, priest, rabbi, or other religious worker is licensed by government. Entry into the religion market is utterly free. Government has no regulatory agencies to screen or validate religious doctrines before such doctrines are allowed to be marketed. There is no cabinet-level office devoted to religion. And no one is forced to attend religious services or to study religious doctrines.

If such freedom works so well for religion, why doubt that it would work equally well in other industries?

11 April 2009

Editor, The Wall Street Journal  
200 Liberty Street  
New York, NY 10281

To the Editor:

Bravo to the letter writers who challenged Thomas Frank's denigration of "eighteenth-century man" (Letters, April 11). The 18th century gave us history's most momentous advance in the social sciences. I speak here of the Scottish Enlightenment, led by David Hume and Adam Smith. These thinkers were the first fully to grasp the fact that

complex and productive social order emerges from - and can emerge ONLY from - millions upon millions of individual actions of countless persons, each of whom aims to achieve only very localized goals. These Enlightened Scots taught us not only that a peaceful and productive society requires no great planner or overseer, but also that efforts to enthrone any such planner or overseer inevitably lead to poverty and tyranny.

Alas, far too many twenty-first century men, such as Mr. Frank, remain insufficiently astute to learn this lesson.

10 April 2009

Editor, The New York Times  
620 Eighth Avenue  
New York, NY 10018

To the Editor:

Councilwoman Melinda Katz's letter today reveals an ironic pitfall of government bailouts of private firms - namely, the inevitable demands by demagoguing politicians that recipient firms be hamstrung in their ability to respond to market forces.

Ms. Katz argues that credit-card companies that received bailout funds should be prevented from raising their rates. While I have no sympathy for any firm that accepted taxpayer funds, the fact is that a firm must be able to change its prices in response to changing market conditions if it is to survive in the market.

By turning private firms into quasi-political entities, bailouts undermine their own ostensible purpose of making these firms strong and nimble competitors.

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9 April 2009

Editor, Florida Times-Union

Dear Editor:

In "Florida's economy: Support local business" (April 9), you report that some Floridians are trying to boost Florida's economy by "buying local." The idea, of course, is that if Floridians buy as much as possible from other Floridians, rather than from non-Floridians, then economic activity in Florida will be stronger.

Nonsense. Suppose that to promote, say, Florida peach growers, consumers in Florida reject good deals on peaches from South Carolina. Florida peach farmers might benefit, but other Floridians suffer. By paying more than necessary for peaches, Florida consumers not only directly make themselves poorer, but they also have less money to spend elsewhere, such as at the local car-repair shop and at local restaurants. In addition, to the extent that the misguided ethic of "buying local" takes hold, local firms have weaker incentives to improve their efficiencies and product offerings. The state's economy suffers, both

today and especially tomorrow.

Florida's buy-local effort boasts the charming name "Backyard Economics." A more appropriate name would be Backward Economics.

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8 April 2009

Editor, Los Angeles Times

Dear Editor:

Writing about medical-care provision in America, Ezra Klein laments that "we abdicate collective responsibility and let individuals fend for themselves" ("When it comes to healthcare, the U.S., Britain and Canada are hurting," April 7).

Mr. Klein's anthropomorphizing of the collective causes him to get matters backward. Collectives aren't sentient beings; they're abstractions. As such, a collective cannot be responsible (or irresponsible) any more than it can be sexually excited or break its wrist. Only individuals are capable of acting responsibly. But when some individuals, masquerading as oracles for "the collective," take resources from other

individuals and then use some of these resources to subsidize individuals' consumption, each individual whose consumption is subsidized DOES behave irresponsibly. Each subsidized individual is freed from the necessity of taking account of the full costs of consuming the resources he uses. That individual, therefore, no longer ably responds to economic reality; he becomes truly irresponsible.

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7 April 2009

Editor, The Wall Street Journal  
200 Liberty Street  
New York, NY 10281

To the Editor:

Several letter writers rightly criticize former Danish Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen's assertion that today's economic downturn reveals American-style capitalism to have failed in comparison to modern Europe's welfare state (Letters, April 7). None of the writers, though, confronts Mr. Rasmussen with the data that are most relevant, namely, unemployment rates.

From 1990 through 2008, America's unemployment rate averaged 5.5 percent while western Europe's unemployment rate averaged 8.4 percent - just about what America's unemployment rate reached only last month (8.5 percent). Moreover, in each and every one of these years, America's unemployment rate was lower - and in many years 40 and even 50 percent lower! - than western Europe's rate. How can Mr. Rasmussen rationally conclude that American capitalism has failed relative to European state welfarism if unemployment in the U.S. only last month, for the first time in more than a quarter century, reached a level that has haunted Europeans consistently for the past two decades?