



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.

4 October 2009

Editor, The Baltimore Sun

Dear Editor:

Complaining about what he regards as the problem of excessively high interest rates on credit-card balances and fees for bounced checks, Dan Rodricks laments that, until the advent of the Internet, "we haven't been able to do much about it" ("Internet turns pet peeves into social movements," Oct. 4).

Not so. Long before I ever heard of the Internet I very effectively did something about these "problems": I've always paid my credit-

card bills in full each month and I've never bounced a check.

Steering clear of these interest rates and fees ain't at all difficult.

3 October 2009

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

To the Editor:

Why will Congress hold hearings into the unsurprising fact that professional football players suffer an unusually large number of head injuries ("Congress to Hold

Hearing on N.F.L. Head Injuries," Oct. 3)?

One reason is the opportunity to grandstand before television cameras. Another reason is suggested by the work of a Nobel laureate economist who today celebrates his 90th birthday: James Buchanan. Buchanan (along with Gordon Tullock) developed the theory of rent-seeking that explains that resources are wasted when interest groups lobby for government privileges. An extension of this theory by Northwestern University's Fred McChesney - called "rent extraction" - explains that politically organized

groups will also pay, if they must, to avoid costly government regulation. [Fred S. McChesney, Money for Nothing (Harvard University Press, 1997)]

My bet is that Congress's self-righteous showboating is at bottom a theatrical threat to extract rents from the N.F.L.

3 October 2009

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

To the Editor:

Congress announced that it will hold hearings into the fact that professional football players suffer a greater-than-average number of long-lasting head injuries ("Congress to Hold Hearing on N.F.L. Head Injuries," Oct. 3). I don't know what's less surprising: the fact that muscular men who choose careers of ferociously butting heads with other muscular men are found to have lots of head injuries, or the fact that "news" of these injuries is immediately exploited by politicians as an opportunity to grandstand and threaten to extend the reach of their power.

2 October 2009

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

To the Editor:

You report that the only art in China today that is thriving and creative is contemporary art ("Artists Test Limits as China Lets (a Few) Flowers Bloom," October 2). You explain this fact by noting that such art "almost by definition reaches only an elite few."

But you also point out, in the same breath, that contemporary art is the only form of art that is no longer controlled by the state.

Isn't the better explanation for the vibrancy of Chinese contemporary art NOT the fewness of its patrons but the freedom of its producers?

1 October 2009

Editor, The Los Angeles Times

Dear Editor:

Wondering if Roman Polanski's rape of a 13-year-old girl in 1977 should be forgiven because of the

tragedies that Polanski himself has suffered, Meghan Daum notes that "Part of what makes the Polanski case fascinating - as well as repugnant - is that it's infused with these sorts of existential questions about what evens the scales" ("Polanski's pain isn't penance," Oct. 1).

Here's one thing that does NOT "even the scales": imprisonment. Imprisonment is justified to restrain violent persons, and perhaps also to serve as a deterrent to others who might commit serious crimes. Contrary to popular myth, though, being imprisoned does not amount to "paying one's debts" to society. Imprisonment isn't a process whereby prisoners compensate their victims.

Furthermore, Polanski's victim isn't society; it's Samantha Gailey. He damn well owes HER something - and if she wants, she should collect. But let's be clear that imprisoning Polanski would in no way promote the worthy goal of having him pay for his crime with compensation paid to his actual victim.

30 September 2009

Editor, Washington Post
1150 15th St., NW
Washington, DC 20071

Dear Editor:

Using a big floppy roller to paint a fine portrait creates only a mess as unintelligible as it is ugly. And so it is with Harold Meyerson's attempt to portray modern market-oriented economics ("Economists for an Imaginary World," Sept. 30).

For example, Mr. Meyerson's suggestion that free-market economics relies uniquely and especially heavily upon elegant mathematics is flat-out wrong. Perhaps the greatest champion of the mathematical modeling of economic relationships is Paul Samuelson, who is no one's idea of a free-marketeer. And perhaps the greatest free-market economist of the 20th century, F.A. Hayek, not only used almost no math in his own work, but literally wrote a book - "The Counter-Revolution of Science" (1952) [<http://www.libertyfund.org/details.asp?displayID=1603>] - to warn economists of the severe limits of mathematics as a language for learning about, and discussing, a

phenomenon as complex as a modern human economy.

29 September 2009

Editor, The Washington Times

Dear Editor:

Protectionist William Hawkins accuses Adam Smith of being "dreadfully wrong" to insist that the ultimate goal of economic activity is consumption rather than production (Letters, Sept. 27).

Alas, the dreadfully wrong one is Mr. Hawkins. He confuses means with ends. Flour, sugar, apples, an oven, and labor are necessary ingredients for baking an apple pie, but these means are valuable in this use only if someone wants to consume the pie. If no one wants to eat apple pie, then using these ingredients to produce the pie would be wasteful.

Adam Smith correctly understood that the desire to consume is what justifies production. If Mr. Hawkins were correct that the ultimate goal of economic activity is production, then he should be just as pleased to have a fresh-from-the-oven sawdust-and-earthworm pie for

dessert as he is to have an apple pie.

28 September 2009

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

To the Editor:

Paul Krugman asserts that anyone who opposes more aggressive government action to stop global warming is either motivated by greed or blinded by ideology ("Cassandras of Climate," Sept. 29).

It's true that when prominent news outlets report that, for example, "As they review the bizarre and unpredictable weather pattern of the past several years, a growing number of scientists are beginning to suspect" a perilous change in global temperatures, it seems foolish to some people not to heed calls to solve the problem. Or that when the mainstream media warn that "Climatological Cassandras are becoming increasingly apprehensive, for the weather aberrations they are studying may be the harbinger of" a frightening global environmental problem, many sensible people cast aside hesitation about trusting

government with more power to avert such a calamity.

But I'm not among these sensible people. You see, the quotations above are from a June 24, 1974, report in Time about the scientific consensus that global temperatures are dangerously COOLING. ["Science: Another Ice Age?" Time, June 24, 1974:

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,944914-1,00.html>]

Scientists being wrong in 1974 doesn't mean that they're wrong in 2009, of course, but it DOES mean that sensible people can legitimately refuse to join in the current hysteria over predictions of catastrophic global warming.

28 September 2009

Mr. James Fallows
The Atlantic

Dear Mr. Fallows:

You argue at your blog that intra-national trade differs fundamentally from international trade because people and capital can more easily move intra-nationally than internationally ("FT, Economist, and me," Sept. 26). The latter point is true, but, contrary to your claim, it doesn't mean that free international trade is more worrisome than is free intra-national trade.

Indeed, the very fact that, say, Minnesotans encounter more difficulty visiting or moving to, say, New Zealand than to New York makes free trade with New Zealand all the more important for Minnesotans. Precisely because it IS so difficult for Minnesotans to

visit or to move to New Zealand, without trade between New Zealand and the U.S. Minnesotans would have practically no access to the fruits of the resources and skills concentrated in New Zealand. Not so if trade between Minnesota and New York is blocked, given Minnesotans' relative ease of visiting and even moving to New York.

One of the beautiful facts about free trade is that it enables Minnesotans to enjoy inexpensive kiwifruit without moving to where it is most efficiently grown – while at the same time allowing New Zealanders to enjoy cutting-edge office products, iron ore, and other goods and services produced in Minnesota without moving to the U.S.