



Comment on the Commentary of the Day

by

Donald J. Boudreaux

Chairman, Department of Economics

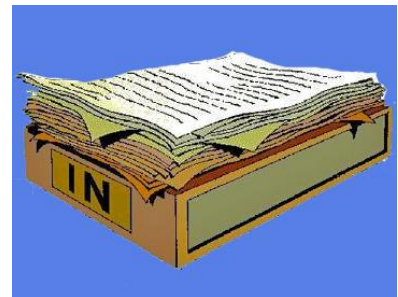
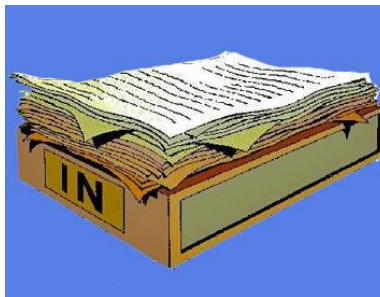
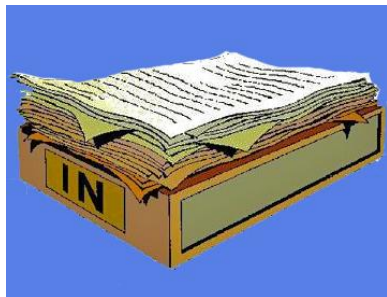
Martha and Nelson Getchell Chair for Free Market Capitalism

Mercatus Center

George Mason University

dboudrea@gmu.edu

<http://www.cafehayek.com>



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 if they are, they may require registration or subscription to access. Some of the articles being commented on are syndicated, therefore, they may also have appeared in other publications.

15 January 2013

"Aaron the Aaron"

Dear Mr. Aaron:

You write that I "flout objective science" when I question the "need for government to attend to" the issue of global warming "with taxes or regulation." You continue: "Your [Boudreaux's] unwillingness to accept objective guidance of established welfare economics demonstrates your dangerous ideology and your obliviousness and disdain of science."

I'll not comment on your suggestion that I improve my "commitment to science" by reading more attentively Paul Krugman. But I will say that a strong case can be made that persons such as yourself who leap immediately from your observation of a plausibly real negative externality (such as carbon emissions) to the conclusion that government must be given more power to "attend to" the problem are the ones who behave unscientifically.

What science is it that assures you that government officials will, in such situations, act impartially and for the public good rather than politically and for special-interest groups? What objective and established proof, or even plausible hypothesis, have you that the very same knowledge, free-rider, and transaction-cost problems that promote the negative externality to begin with do not also operate - or operate with even greater force - to distort decision-making by government officials? I believe that history and science reveal that the answer to both questions in typical situations is "none."

I leave you with this scientific observation from my colleague Richard Wagner:

"Expositions of welfare economics typically assume that the analyst possesses knowledge that is in no one's capacity to possess. A well-intentioned administrator of a corrective state would face a vexing problem because the knowledge he would need to act responsibly and effectively does not exist in any one place, but rather is divided and dispersed among market participants. Such an administrator would seek to achieve patterns of resource utilization that would reflect trades that people would have made had they been able to do so, but by assumption were prevented from making because transaction costs were too high in various ways. A corrective state that would be guided by the principles and formulations of welfare economics would be a state whose duties would exceed its cognitive capacities."*

Sincerely,
Donald J. Boudreaux
Professor of Economics
and
Martha and Nelson Getchell Chair for the Study of Free Market Capitalism at the
Mercatus Center George Mason University Fairfax, VA 22030

* Richard E. Wagner, *Economic Policy in a Liberal Democracy* (Cheltenham, UK:
Edward Elgar, 1996), p. 20.

31 January 2013

Editor, The Atlantic.com

Dear Editor:

Emily Matchar correctly insists that the demise in home cooking was caused by industrialization and not by feminism ("Betty Friedan Did Not Kill Home Cooking," Jan 25). This point is important and it extends beyond the kitchen stove. By raising women's market wages - and by creating affordable products such as automatic clothes washers, wrinkle-free fabrics, and disposable diapers that dramatically lessen the time required for housework - women today are more free than ever to choose to work outside of the home. (Families increasingly enjoy, therefore, all the material benefits formally produced by full-time housewives PLUS the extra goods and services that can be bought with incomes earned by working women.)

A comment of a young woman (born circa 1969) in the 1999 BBC reality show "1900 House" is germane. Hired to work as a housemaid in a house fitted out to be like one that was typical for middle-class Londoners in 1900, this late-20th-century woman soon became frustrated by the ceaseless and arduous work required to keep the 1900 house clean. She remarked in surprise to the show's producers and audience that she now realizes that the source of women's liberation wasn't so much political activism as it was "the carpet sweeper and domestic appliances that gave women their liberty because it saves so much time at working."*

Sincerely,
Donald J. Boudreaux
Professor of Economics
and
Martha and Nelson Getchell Chair for the Study of Free Market Capitalism at the
Mercatus Center George Mason University Fairfax, VA 22030

* Starting at the 6:30 mark in this clip from the show:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6HTTB9JmWAQ>

1 February 2013

Editor, The Wall Street Journal
1211 6th Ave.
New York, NY 10036

Dear Editor:

I share James Taranto's unfavorable assessment of Yale law professor Bruce Ackerman's political ideology ("20th Century Man," Feb. 1). Ackerman's "Progressivism" is a reflection of the atavistic attitude that the economy performs best when it is consciously guided by the firm hand of a sovereign - a sovereign that, if elected democratically, can be trusted with nearly boundless powers.

But Ackerman deserves praise at least for his honesty regarding the written Constitution. In his 1991 book, *We the People*, Ackerman admits that the vast powers that Uncle Sam has exercised over the economy since the New Deal are far greater than any such powers envisioned by the Constitution's 18th-century framers. To that point Ackerman also concedes that Uncle Sam's current long regulatory reach is at odds with the actual Constitutional text. But, says Ackerman, the "constitutional moment" that allegedly was the 1930s mobilized the electorate and top government officials to amend the Constitution in fact if not formally. It is the Constitution informally amended that Ackerman relies upon to justify Leviathan.

Of course, one is entitled to question Ackerman's thesis that the Constitution can be amended informally (that is, without going through Article V procedures) - especially when that thesis celebrates and sanctifies majoritarian passions of the very sort that the Constitution's framers feared.

Sincerely,
Donald J. Boudreaux
Professor of Economics
and
Martha and Nelson Getchell Chair for the Study of Free Market Capitalism at the
Mercatus Center
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA 22030

* Bruce Ackerman, *We the People* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1991).

Ackerman on page 119 is worth quoting at length: "Roosevelt and the New Deal Congress had not chosen to codify their new constitutional principles by enacting a few

formal amendments, of the sort contemplated by Article Five. Instead, the President and Congress left it to the Justices themselves to codify the New Deal revolution in a series of transformative judicial opinions, threatening to pack the Court unless it accepted this novel constitutional responsibility. When the Justices executed their famous 'switch in time' in the spring of 1937, they began to execute the task Congress and the President had assigned to it."

