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Move Over, Hollywood: Stossel's Writing His Own Fantasy

Kevin Carson

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Every time I write a commentary on one of John Stossel's godawful columns, I tell myself I'll lay off him for a while. But good lord, this latest wretched little piece of pro-corporate apologetics ("Corporations Have Become Hollywood's Go-To Villains," *Reason*, July 1) is about the worst thing he's ever done. The biggest challenge any principled defender of free markets encounters is all the people who think the "free market" equals corporate capitalism or big business domination of society. And the damage done by self-professed "libertarian" corporate shills like Stossel make the challenge ten times worse.

Stossel complains that his beloved corporations are vilified by Hollywood, through plots in which "evil corporations routinely dispatch heartless goons to rough up whistleblowers, political activists and average citizens."

In real life, Stossel says, corporate behavior is completely different. See, "abusing customers" is "a bad business model" — "it

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rarely happens, and when it does it's unsustainable." "In the real world, instead of killing customers or scheming to keep them poor, companies profit by trying really hard to give us what we want, and they prefer that we stay healthy, if only so that we keep buying their stuff and to limit their insurance liability."

I think it's Hollywood that's describing the real world here, and Stossel who's writing ideologically-tinted fantasy.

When Stossel says corporations don't do these things because it's bad for business, is he describing how things would work in an idealized free market? Does he think what we have right now is a free market, and corporations in our present reality actually operate according to his ideal set of rules? If what we have right now is a free market, why does Stossel feel the need to write columns promoting an economic liberty that already exists? Or if it's an unfree market and there are restrictions on economic liberty, does Stossel see corporations as only the victims and never the beneficiaries? I have no idea what Stossel actually means by this incoherent garbage, and frankly I doubt he does either.

In any case, the actual behavior of real-world corporations is a lot closer to Hollywood's depiction than to Stossel's. We need look no further than Hollywood itself – an industry whose entire business model centers on robbing customers through state-enforced copyright monopolies, backed by a whole host of draconian legislation under which people suffer enormous fines, get Internet access shut off or have their domain names seized without due process of law.

If we survey the actual global economy, we find the most profitable global corporations all depend on the same "intellectual property"-based business model: software, entertainment, biotech, pharma, electronics... even offshored manufacturing depends on IP to enforce a monopoly on disposal of the product contracted out to independent sweatshops. That's why the main effect of so-called "Free Trade Agreements" is not to lower tariff trade

barriers, but to drastically increase "intellectual property" trade barriers.

Another huge chunk of the global economy is extractive industries like mining, logging, oil and agribusiness, most of which still operate on land that was stolen from the people under colonial and neo-colonial regimes. They include evil corporations like BP (which helped overthrow Mossadeq), Shell (which hires death squads to terrorize local activists), Rio Tinto (with its history of backing terror squads and robbing native people of their land), and United Fruit/Chiquita (which helped overthrow Arbenz for trying to return some of the land it stole from the peasantry).

Domestically, the US economy would be in a state of permanent depression if not for a permanent war economy and the state-sponsored automobile-highway complex to utilize otherwise idle industrial capacity, and chronic deficit spending to provide otherwise superfluous investment capital with an outlet in the form of government securities with guaranteed returns.

Even small downtown businesses depend on licensing and zoning to suppress competition from self-employed microentrepreneurs operating out of their own homes.

In short, under the present unholy alliance between capital and the state, big business makes money by "dispatch[ing] heartless goons to rough up whistleblowers, political activists and average citizens..., killing customers [and] scheming to keep them poor..."