

On the Other Hand...

Kevin Carson

April 28, 2005

Before I get too carried away, I also spotted this quote from Alex Singleton:

According to Alex Singleton, the report's author: "The Trade Justice Movement thinks the world economy would work better if it were centrally planned. We saw central planning in the Soviet Union and all it produced was poverty. The only trade that has ever lifted countries out of poverty is free trade."

Ah, well, comrades—two steps forward, one step back...

As far as I can tell, the present world economy goes a long way toward being centrally planned—and most of it's done by the sort of corporate CEOs and neoliberal politicians who talk most about "free trade." This quote from Sean Gabb deserves another reading:

If you think that I came here tonight to defend multinational corporations and the international government institutions, you have chosen the wrong person. These are dishonest. They are corrupt. They are incompetent. They have blood on their hands.

But do not suppose for a moment that the world trading order as it actually exists is liberal or more than incidentally connected with free markets. A free market is a place where individuals and groups of individuals come together to transact voluntary exchanges without any backing of government force. To call the actually existing order liberal – or "neo-liberal" – is as taxonomically accurate as calling the old Soviet Communist Party syndicalist. That order is based on tariffs, subsidies and a web of other often invisible regulations. The international institutions are a projection of Western states. The multinational corporations are creatures of these states. They shelter behind the privilege of limited liability. They get their political friends to cartelise markets, and do favours in return.

We've seen about as much of free trade in the post-1945 world (or the post-1500 world, for that matter) as we did of syndicalism in Stalinist Russia. "Free trade" is something that's allowed to operate within the interstices of state capitalism, and tolerated only to the extent it's compatible with a larger state capitalist agenda. So long as corporate elites—our class enemy—are able to

determine the strategic framework within which “free market reform” is selectively introduced, the “free market” activity that exists will simply be an engine harnessed to turn the wheels of a state-enforced system of class exploitation. Any description of the benefits of free trade to the Third World, therefore, should be in the subjunctive.

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