

The Best Plan: No Plan

Suppose you were given the task of coming up with a master plan to make sure that everyone in this country, all 300,000,000 or so of us, had enough food to eat. It's all up to you!

The first obvious question would be, "What do I have to work with?" You would need to know what resources would be available to you, what powers you would have, and so on. For example, if you had to work with what you now personally own, you wouldn't have a prayer. So how much of OTHER people's money would you be given for the project? And, if you're going to plan and manage the thing, you'll need control over all sorts of things, including all the farms, lots of trucks or trains to distribute food, all the buildings, equipment and personnel for distribution locations, and so on. Try to imagine what the price tag would have to be on such an endeavor. But even if you had all the money in the world, could you do it? Do you know enough about how everything works, and could you solve all the problems that might arise?

No. You still wouldn't have a prayer of making it work. Neither would any other individual, no matter how educated, knowledgeable, or wise. (When you think of centralized control of food production, think of the bread lines in Soviet Russia.) In short, the assigned task CAN'T BE DONE, not by you or anyone else, because no person has all the knowledge required to plan, organize, or carry out such a complex, massive operation.

Luckily, no one's trying to (in this country, anyway). But if even your best effort--or the best effort of any other person--would fail, and no one's even TRYING, why aren't we all starving? In short, we have a huge excess of food in this country, with a huge variety of products at an amazingly low price, at many thousands of locations across the country, precisely because there is NO "master plan."

But isn't that terrifying? There is NO centralized scheme to feed us all! No one is being forced to produce any food, or ship it anywhere. There is NO guarantee that YOU will have anything to eat tomorrow! No one is making sure we all have food! AAAAH!!!

So why do we? Why do we have, not merely enough food to survive (which by itself is an impressive accomplishment), but a huge variety of high-quality, low cost food, even in places hundreds of miles from where most kinds of food can be grown? There wasn't even a big, centralized, concerted effort TRYING to make that happen. So what made it happen?

A guy in Florida, who figured out a new way to keep bugs off his oranges, made it happen. But not by himself. A guy who started a little trucking company in Texas, who figured out how to make things run just a bit faster and more efficiently, made it happen. But not by himself. A farmer in Iowa, who put in the extra time to cultivate that extra field, made it happen. But not by himself. MILLIONS of individuals, not governed or guided by any central plan, most of them not even aware of the rest of the picture, made it happen. But if there was no master plan making them all do what

they do, and making them all work together in harmony, what could possibly have made it all work?

Simple: the quest for PERSONAL GAIN. The amazingly complex arrangements, intricate organization, ongoing adaptation and problem solving, all come from what is often termed "greed." (This is nothing new to those familiar with "Austrian" economics.) The self-interest of millions of individuals, most of whom know only their tiny little piece of the big picture, is capable of doing what no centralized plan ever has, or ever could.

But let's suppose you had all those people under your command. Let's suppose you could boss them around, and let's suppose they would all gladly obey. You STILL would do a horrendous job of things. (Don't feel bad; anyone else would, too.) You wouldn't know the best route for the trucker to take, or what time of day he should drive. You wouldn't know the best time to plant and harvest corn, or how to rotate the crops most efficiently. There would literally be MILLIONS of choices to be made, and in almost every case, you wouldn't have the first clue about the right way to do anything.

In a free market, each person's bottom line creates a constant incentive for each person to figure out and make better choices. The economics phenomenon known as "the market" quickly and automatically corrects most errors. But if YOU were making all the choices, and everyone below you was just blindly following orders, it would be a complete disaster. How much wheat should go to Chicago, as opposed to Orlando? Does Los Angeles need more corn than Detroit? How could you ever hope to answer every question about how much crop each farm will produce, how fast it will get to somewhere else, how much is needed there, and so on? Of course, you could always "delegate," by giving some other busy-body a smaller number of questions that he couldn't answer correctly either. Then you'd just have a bigger bureaucracy, with similar horrible results (and more opportunity for corruption).

Actually, there is ONE way you could accomplish the stated goal, but it's really radical. You could address the nation, and boldly proclaim, "I don't KNOW how to make everything work! Figure it out for yourselves!" In other words, you could advocate ANARCHY--a complete ABSENCE of a central plan, a total departure from the whole idea of centralized planning and control. In other words, you could do NOTHING, and achieve an infinitely better result than you could have accomplished any other way.

Americans have outstanding examples of how this works, in lots of different areas (food production, transportation technology, information technology, and so on). Nonetheless, there are still areas of life in which most Americans are terrified of the idea of NOT having things centrally managed and controlled (defense and road-building being two common examples). But the laws of economics don't CHANGE from one industry to another. Human nature doesn't function one way when it comes to roads and another way when it comes to cars. The arguments showing how idiotic it is to have "government" managing food production can be applied just as well to show how idiotic it is to have "government" managing ANYTHING.

Nonetheless, we now have millions of people discussing what centralized, authoritarian, forcibly-impose "plan" might fix health care. Last week the discussion was about which centralized, authoritarian, forcibly-imposed "plan" might fix the economy. And next week there will be some other crisis--real or imagined--for which the politicians will propose yet another "master plan."

If you think ANY centralized plan can make "health care" work, you don't understand human nature or economics. If you think ANY centralized plan can protect people from crime, you don't understand human nature or economics. If you think ANY centralized plan can lead to a prosperous country, you don't understand human nature or economics. In short, if you think that having a small group of people FORCIBLY CONTROLLING everyone else will ever make society better, you don't understand reality. And if you're scared to death of the alternative, especially when it's called "anarchy" (oh, heavens!), you need to grow up.

The next time you visit the local grocery store, take a good look around, because you'll be standing in ANARCHY!

(Actually, thanks to the myriad of "regulations" and "taxes" that interfere with food production and distribution in this country, what you see is really what voluntary interaction can achieve, even with a huge number of obstacles thrown in its way.)

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