

The Challenge of Undesigned and Anonymous Order

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The spontaneous order of the market has long been an object of both theoretical and aesthetic contemplation for libertarians. From Adam Smith's discussion of the number of hands it took to make a wool coat, to Leonard Read's justly famous "I, Pencil," to the examples that fill Russ Roberts's parable novel *The Price of Everything*, libertarians have tried to communicate through stories the idea that order can arise without a designer.

The repeated attempts to communicate this core idea suggest that the challenge of doing so is greater than it seems, and I would argue that one reason for this is that we are cognitively predisposed to resist the idea of undesigned order. The human brain came of age through a long evolutionary process, the vast majority of which was spent in small kin-based groups of no more than 100 or so. In such groups the relationships among people are face-to-face or intimate — everyone knows everyone else, and each person's role is clearly defined and known to others. The ties that hold people together and form the degree of social cooperation that exists are visible to all. Such groups also had clear hierarchies to them, with only a subgroup, often elders, making decisions about resource allocation.

As a result, our brains are used to thinking that social relationships need to be visible and among people we already know. We are also predisposed to think that resource allocation and social order more generally are the products of clear direction from the top and well-defined roles in a face-to-face world. Of course these cognitive predispositions, much like genetic predispositions, are not an unchangeable destiny. Still, that evolution has given us brains used to seeing the social world in this way makes for an uphill climb when we try to persuade people of the existence and beneficence of undesigned order.

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