

Chicago

Nobody asked but ...

Now that I've been home a few days, back from Chicago, I ask myself, "How does it all work?" And I keep coming back to self-ordering and the institutionalizing of individuality.

First of all, greater Chicago (aka Chicagoland) is an agglomeration of unique parts. There are thousands of semi-autonomous territories, some formal, others informal. And the influences among and between these unique parts are innumerable and various, along myriad dimensions. The messages are carried by millions of individuals.

Furthermore, each of the systems that are subsystems to Chicagoland have grown up independently and evolved dependently by the actions of randomly impinging forces. An example would be the interurban rail systems. These are all gathered under the umbrella now of an octopus called METRA. It's name is a reflection of its bureaucratic nature, but each of its parts arose according to separate stories. Various private rail carriers started service to various locations on the urban and suburban maps. For instance, you take the South Shore line from Northern Indiana, or for another, you ride in on the Union Pacific Northwest (UP-N) branch of the METRA. Nearly half a century ago, when I used the lines from the West, they carried the Burlington Northern logo.

The point is that my information on how all this came to pass is sketchy, but you can leave Lake Forest at an exact time, then arrive at Union Station at an exact later time. You can plan a day around that fact. I don't know how it works, but it does.

We had an interesting experience on the UP-N. Special fares apply for different passengers, with specific documentation. On the way in, we sort of negotiated with the conductor on the fares, 2 seniors, one 11-year-old, and one 13-year-old, he asked if we had ID and we said yes. Price quoted, accepted. The conductor was a loosely attached arm of the system, and his decisions were final. That evening, coming back, we had a choice at the station, either buy tickets at the window or pay a surcharge of \$5 to buy fares from the conductor. We decided to mitigate risk and buy at the window. But the ticket clerk, being so much closer to HQ, did not show a propensity to negotiate. We learned that "seniors" must have a specific ID issued by the government overseer of METRA — bureaucratic hoops of fire.

So, it was clear. Chicago works one human encounter at a time, one negotiated transaction at a time. Mises would be happy to know that the molecules of this economy behaved according to the natural laws of human action.

— Kilgore Forelle