



Ingersoll and Air-Bottling

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Article citation:

Gaffney, Mason. "Ingersoll and Air-Bottling." November 1992. Working paper.

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INGERSOLL AND AIR-BOTTLING
Mason Gaffney

24 Nov 86; rev. Nov. 92

"Don't you know that if people could bottle the air, they would? ... there would be an American Air-Bottling Association. ... they would let millions die for want of breath, if they could not pay for the air." -- Robert G. Ingersoll, ca. 1892, cit. Roger E. Greeley (ed.), 1983, The Best of Robert Ingersoll, Immortal Infidel. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, p.79.

Times have caught up with Ingersoll. Ronald Coase, prominent Chicago economist, says polluters (whom he calls emitters) have as much right to emit as victims (he says receptors) have to breathe clean air. It doesn't matter, says Coase, how we assign property rights originally: as long as there is a free market it will all work out. But, since people have invested in polluting facilities, and since property must be respected, ... -- you see whither he is drifting.

And was he laughed to scorn? Au contraire, he was lifted on the shoulders of his adulatory peers and made into a demi-god (which tells you something about his peers). Having risen on wings of theory the idea found its way into practice, and today The South Coast Air Quality Management District awards "offset rights" to those with strong track records of pollution. New polluters have to buy "property rights" from old ones.

In effect, we don't fine people for polluting, we pay them to stop: vice is rewarded. If you have been a good neighbor, and voluntarily stopped before, too bad, no offset right for you: virtue is penalized. I have offered not to emit millions of tons of nitrates and sulfates, too, and underbid the big refineries by 50%, but that doesn't cut it: to cash in on this, you must have been abusing your neighbors before.

Pursuant to Coase we should no doubt award the Soviets a perpetual right to have periodic melt-downs at Chernobyl, rights they could then sell to Uganda or Paraguay or other LDC wanting to modernize with a melt-down or two.

And those who want to breathe? Coase says they, too, should buy that right from Ancient and Honorable polluters, by buying and retiring offset rights. (They are only "environmental activists," after all, an eccentric lot.) For this they gave him the Nobel Prize. You see, old Ingersoll was on the mark. Nothing is too absurd once we accept trespassing, leeching, and sponging as principles of establishing property rights.