

The Greater Realities of Privatization: A Historian's Perspective

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THE ISSUE OF PRIVATIZATION, HISTORY IS BLUNT TO REMIND US, is not consistently as neat as it seems. The public lands have always been highly commercialized; by itself, the issue is nothing new. Even some of our greatest environmentalists, Ansel Adams, for example, have made millions off the public lands. Best's Studio, years ago renamed the Ansel Adams Gallery, sits prominently in Yosemite Valley. It is a distinctly commercial enterprise. Does it matter that Adams's heirs pay a franchise fee for the privilege of remaining on public land? Does it matter that Delaware North, the primary concessionaire in Yosemite, pays for that privilege, too? No franchise fee changes the fact that the public lands generate profits for a few. Everything said to the contrary is merely to rationalize why those commercial privileges should persist.

Simply, American culture remains the problem here. The American system, its principal argument begins, has always kept government out of business. Today, the argument dramatically holds in Iraq, where the federal government has turned most construction over to private contractors. After determining the standards and deadlines, government gets out of the way. If the contractors' incentive is to make a profit, government's obligation is to allow that they do, for only by allowing private enterprise, the argument comes full circle, can government efficiency be ensured.

The point is that more than 100 years ago, American culture beat out the government in the management of the public lands. Government got the hard job—preserving what existed and buying more. Concessionaires got the right to profit. The final triumph of private enterprise was turning what people truly needed into simply

what they desired. Inexorably, public facilities and services grew far beyond providing just basic services. In the national parks, for example, the true need for a place to eat and sleep became an excuse to pursue recreation. First under the railroads, then spurred by the automobile, and often promoted by environmentalists themselves, others "services" keep entering the equation, until the very definition of "service" changed.

The privatization movement is just the latest chapter in that history. It may differ in wanting the government entirely out of the way, but again, only by degree. Commercial interests have always asked the government to stand aside from the chance to profit. It is just now, with the public lands established—in both fact and popularity—that those interests feel no need for government. The biggest cost is behind them and the nation—having to secure the opportunity.

That said, everyone is playing the game, including environmentalists. It is just that their commercial pursuits, or so they argue, fund “appropriate” causes. Were the Disney Company to make the same claim, Audubon, the Sierra Club, and others would let out a howl. Similarly, when environmentalists advertise and conduct mass mailings, that is considered outreach. A corporation doing the same thing is lobbying. The difference in the meaning is who is saying the words. Today, there are few nonprofits failing to make the argument they never abuse the public trust, while corporations always do.

The argument about entrance fees falls in the same category of who is making the claims. Years ago, when environmentalists believed the parks were overcrowded, they themselves recommended the fees be raised. Now that commercial interests are supporting the argument, the fees suddenly are too much. In truth, they are just about what they have always been, with the exception of fees never before collected for visiting specific sites and trailheads. In 1959, touring the national parks, my family paid a \$3 entrance fee at Yellowstone, Yosemite, Crater Lake, and Grand Canyon. The permit was for seven days. Since a gallon of gas was 25 cents, and a motel \$3 a night, we might extrapolate that the \$3 we paid in 1959 would be \$20 dollars today. And indeed, visiting Yellowstone in May 2004, that was the fee my wife and I actually paid.

Then let’s play *To Tell the Truth*. Will the real developer of Yellowstone stand up? Is it the concessionaire; is it the Park Service; or is it truly, as they claim, public tastes driving them? The Park Service would not “need” to be widening and straightening the roads, for example, if the public’s desire for SUVs did not “demand”

them. That is culture, and everyone is to blame. When I was a seasonal ranger in Yosemite, it never ceased amazing me how many of my environmental friends—railing against development—enjoyed the Ahwahnee Hotel for dinner. Either that or I found them in the bar. For that matter, the annual Bracebridge dinner was originally choreographed by Ansel Adams. None of it is necessary; all of it draws people into the park who have no interest in the natural setting. All of it profits the concessionaire. And environmentalists subscribe to it, too. As John McPhee wrote years ago with respect to the Sierra Club’s executive director, David Brower, development Brower had known in his youth he accepted. It was new development that he opposed. And indeed, David Brower and Ansel Adams agreed that their beloved Ahwahnee Hotel was not the problem in Yosemite Valley. Too many people were.

In other words, too many people other than themselves. Even when admitting that their presence in the valley contributed to the overcrowding, the point is that they asked others to consider leaving first. This is to explain why the campaign against privatization is so difficult. The only way out of the conundrum is for everyone to agree that the problem is inclusive; that, as Garrett Hardin pointed out years ago, the tragedy of the commons applies to all.

History offers that the time has arrived for a new reality in the management of the public lands, in which technology fights technology, as it were, rather than people fighting each other. Historically, the railroads came closest to avoiding expediency while protecting the values of preservation. Innately, every passenger train exacted discipline, both within the public lands and from without. Although crossing thousands

of miles of landscape, no one could pull off the road. There were no broken beer bottles at the overlooks, no painting graffiti across the cliffs. Choosing a right-of-way, railroad executives thought ahead, hoping to sell the American landscape. Construction looked to a future when millions of tourists, using railroads, would want an unblemished landscape as their diversion. If the national parks were beautiful, but the land outside them compromised, expectation would be destroyed.

Inside the national parks, as well, the first great developers were the railroads. The point is that because every passenger was already their captive, there was no need to harass and importune visitors from the roadside. With the automobile, that protective influence was radically changed. What had previously been gateway communities lost out to corridors of development. A corridor, as distinct from a gateway, importuned the motorist from miles away. Visiting Grand Canyon in 1980, I recall billboards advertising McDonald's at the park entrance as far away as New Mexico. I believe that is still the case. Billboards, tourist traps, and gas stations line Highway 64 north from Williams. It is a distance to the canyon of 65 miles. Traveling by train to the national parks allowed none of that. The trains went straight to the gateways, through scenery still undefiled, and once arriving transferred passengers to community staging where every tourist was still controlled.

By itself, privatization is not the issue here; the issue is the absence of visitor discipline. The power of the automobile is to arm privatization with a whole host of obnoxious arguments. Take away the automobile, and privatization is dead, at least, that clamoring to pockmark the public lands with development. How would the

visitors get there? In Europe, which is highly developed, they save what remains of their pristine landscapes by demanding that visitors arrive by train. It is not wilderness but it is not obnoxious. The technology, demanding a community experience, reins in what is frivolous and irresponsible.

True, we would not want for the American wilderness the absolute access that is Europe. But a dose of their discipline would be a good thing. It is the insidious side of the privatization argument—the removal of government discipline—driving the defenders of the public lands to the wall. In Yellowstone, for example, it is not the right of access, but rather the *how* of access, that frustrates preservation. More people enjoying the park in winter would be a wonderful thing. We need only restore the historical discipline, using snow coaches instead of snowmobiles. Technically, that is what the railroads did. Visitors came to Gardiner and West Yellowstone on the trains, where they simply exchanged one form of public conveyance for another. It was the word “public” in public transportation asking visitors whether they were serious about seeing the park, asking what they were willing to give up. Are you willing to exchange privacy for discipline, ensuring that these lands will be protected forever?

Only public transportation asks that question innately. Inevitably, automobiles and snowmobiles never ask it. If the railroads of the past were better stewards, it is because they had to be. The technology reined in what was mindless, whether development or privatization. As an example, it was not the railroads of Yellowstone that built in 1970 the gargantuan parking lot surrounding Old Faithful Inn, especially not the parking lot directly in front of it—visible straight across the geyser basin. Now

the visitor, looking back at the inn, sees first that mass of cars. The railroads' vision for the inn was tasteful. Properly, it should appear to rise from its surroundings. The parking lot later sprawled in front of the inn was evidence of the railroads' retreat. As they retreated, community gave way to privatization, not only with regard to fees, but more important with regard to stewardship. It was the railroads needing to sell visiting the park as something visitors did in common. It was the automobile telling visitors they need not think of anyone, or anything. Yellowstone was just for them.

As compelling proof of this distinction, consider what happens when a park moves to preserve its community values; in Glacier National Park, for example, the rebuilding of its historic red buses. All 33 of them are back on the road, thanks to a partnership including Glacier Park Inc., the National Park Foundation, the Ford Motor Company, and several others. Historically, it was these buses, meeting the trains, that gave all the parks their community ambiance. Only in Glacier have they survived as working buses, not merely museum artifacts. Imagine if Glacier had lost them (as its train itself today is threatened). Imagine if no park served to remind us how public transportation encourages a spirit of preservation.

Does it matter if someone profits? Not if how they profit demands good stewardship. There is where we need to go. By itself, simply to eliminate the temptation to privatize goods and services will not eliminate that deeper problem. The Park Service can miss it, too, and has, simply by widening and straightening park roads just because Detroit is building bigger cars.

A comparable rediscovery of community is occurring in Yellowstone. Xanterra, its

principal concessionaire, now agrees with the need for change. The company sponsors Heritage Days, for example, through which it has pledged the restoration of Yellowstone's historic motor stages. Granted, the Park Service insists they should be restored, as well, but Heritage Days is the company's idea. Xanterra is the first to agree with the critics of privatization that the movement to privatize everything is inappropriate. The wonder of the national parks is that they belong to all of us, and Xanterra invites its speakers to say just that.

This is to remind us once again that the issue is not so neat. There are responsible concessionaires, and some downright good ones, just as government can be irresponsible. There are concessionaires who wisely counsel the industry that a market free-for-all will destroy the golden goose. It is a reminder from whom those concessionaires descended—the railroads, who knew better than anyone that the discriminating visitor would not stand for a common experience.

Ultimately, the real issue is the culture, our penchant as Americans for commercializing everything. Tasteful development in the national parks we accepted long ago. Even John Muir was capable of seeing that some facilities in the parks were necessary. Thus, he praised the coming of the railroad to Grand Canyon as “little more disturbing than the hooting of an owl in the lonely woods.” The point is that it was a railroad, not a parking lot. The ambiance of the canyon still prevailed. Every visitor was locked into a conveyance demanding responsibility, minus a gauntlet of development along the way.

As America has strayed from that discipline, so commercial interests have strayed, as well. The park experience they know best is turnover. They would like to sell the

public lands just like they do hamburgers. They would like to own the public lands so that they could be sold. For these interests, the automobile is all-important; get people in, and get them out. Turn contemplation into recreation. The frenetic pace of American privatization had its origins along the road. It is no wonder that in talking about privatization, its adherents speak to a discipline that is false, one in which the marketplace, rather than community, determines what is best for the public lands.

Our final concern should be for the other institution succumbing to that argument—our colleges and universities. Once the bulwark of the public lands, they, too, have increasingly adopted the argument that everything should pay its way. Accordingly, university presidencies are drawing up to a million dollars. Many football coaches earn easily twice that. Professors are asked to bring in greater research funds and to provide inventions that can be patented. Programs and courses that cannot pay their way are dropped, or given over to part-time faculty. Senior faculty accused of “traditional” research are generally not replaced.

Even the best ideas need reinforcement, teaching them constantly to the young. These days, however, in place of the teaching of public service, universities increas-

ingly teach the marketplace. Computer science, communications, and business replace history and biology as legitimate majors. If a student wants to take biology, the proper term is “biotech.” If a student even thinks of majoring in history or literature, administrators call it a waste of time.

The public lands, the University of the Wilderness, cannot survive without tradition. A respect for public service is at their core. One therefore suspects, even where it cannot be proved, that the power behind the privatization movement is also the failure of higher education. If young people are not taught to believe in public service, how can they believe in the public lands?

Until these issues, too, are addressed and resolved, the privatization movement will only keep gaining strength. History proves that what saved the public lands in the first place was a belief beyond the marketplace. That comes from within society; it grows within the heart. In the past, Americans have known that the value of the public lands is something no marketplace can fully honor. If that respect is breaking down, there are many places we need look for answers. Meanwhile, we should never doubt that the search is necessary, for Wallace Stegner was nobly right. We cease looking for the core of the problem at the peril of the best idea we ever had.

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