

# Opening the Box

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*This article is the twenty-second in a year-long series about economics and holidays.*

December 26<sup>th</sup>, the day after Christmas, is Boxing Day in the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Somehow the U.S. got left out of the family of former British colonies in this instance, because Boxing Day isn't part of our holiday tradition, although perhaps it should be.

The box of Boxing Day is not the empty gift box that held a shirt or a necklace or a video game. It's a particular kind of box. A Christmas box was once a clay box was used in artisan shops. Apprentices, masters, visitors, and customers would put money into it all year. The day after Christmas, it would be shattered and shared among the workers. More or less a combination tip jar and Christmas bonus. Its origins extend back to feudal times when the Lord of the manor was expected, indeed obligated, to give boxes of practical gifts such as cloth, grain and tools to his serfs. The church's poor box was also opened on Christmas Day and the contents were distributed to the poor on the next day.

So this somewhat obscure holiday is not about the sport of boxing, or about boxing up the gifts you don't want and either returning them to the store or inflicting them on the needy. Boxing Day is about sharing, and more than that, it's about the obligation to share with those who are less fortunate. Sharing is a year round obligation, but from our agricultural past we are aware that the needs are greatest at this time of year when the earth is taking a sabbatical from food production in the northern hemisphere and the cold and dark requires more fuel and clothing for warmth and light. For the serfs on the manor, the Boxing Day distribution was not charity, but their right and due as participants in the manorial economy. For the workers in the Victorian shops, it was part of their earned compensation, a tidy lump sum after 52 weeks of just getting by on barely adequate wages. These customs live on in certain parts of the market economy in Christmas bonuses, profit-sharing, and the occasional worker-owned cooperative or employee stock ownership plan. But for the most part the end-of-year distribution has been moved from the center of the economy to the fringes with attacks of holiday generosity to charities who serve the poor.

Joseph Singer, a Harvard Law professor and a Talmudic scholar, writes in *The Edges of the Field* that (according to Hebrew scripture) we are obligated as owners of the land to share in the fruits of the land with those who are landless. We must not harvest up to the edges of the field, but leave something for the gleaners to come by and take to sustain themselves. That practice is not charity, but an interpretation of the meaning of property law and property rights in a nation that was bound together by covenant. The central point of Joseph Singer's book, and of some other writers on the subject of property rights in recent years, is that every right implies an obligation or a responsibility. Not charity, not largesse, not upper class benevolence to the lower classes, but duty, responsibility, obligation. If I have a right to an education, citizens have an obligation to provide it. If you have a right to be safe in your home from thieves and intruders, the rest of us have an obligation to fund a police force for your protection, while you yourself have an obligation to take reasonable precautions like locking your doors.

Adam Smith wrote not only more famous *The Wealth of Nations* but also its earlier companion work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith saw a market society as a network of rights and obligations, some personal, some impersonal. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* provided the ethical framework and

motivation to be a good, responsible member of that marvelous, powerful network called a market system. The government's primary role was to define and enforce some of the rules of the game on which a market system depends, primarily property rights that define the privileges and responsibilities of ownership.

Within that framework, the actions of individuals based on enlightened self-interest will lead to the efficient use of resources, producing the mix of goods and services people want at prices they are willing to pay, creating jobs and income and opportunities for everyone. We wouldn't need a cumbersome bureaucratic structure to dictate what each serf or artisan or gleaner received on Boxing Days and during the year in between. But we would need to be mindful that the income and wealth that we enjoy within that system is a product not only of our own efforts but of the work of others, much of it invisible, which made our success possible. That's where the obligation part comes in. That's the part that is so easy to forget.

The good outcomes of relying on the market will happen, according to Smith and others, only as long as we do not undermine or weaken the moral seed capital that we have inherited. That inheritance comes from the ancient Hebrew and feudal understanding of society as a covenant of reciprocal obligations, and from the medieval craftsmen and artisans who saw the proceeds of boxing day were. The Tea Party and other political conservatives are right to call attention to the importance of protecting and defending the rights and privileges we enjoy in a free society, including the right to choose where we live and with whom, to spend our incomes as we see fit, to be safe in our home and possessions, to vote to choose our leaders, to exercise freedom of speech and religion. But political progressives and liberals also remind us that those rights have historically been accompanied by the obligation to ensure that others have those rights. The obligation to pay taxes. The obligation to pay anyone who works for us a fair wage, including not just those who work directly for us but those whose earnings we have some say about, like the people who work for our cities or our churches and voluntary organizations. The obligation to help those who have temporarily lost their niche within the system that used to ensure them an income. Boxing Day is a good time to reflect on how we balance our personal and collective books of rights and responsibilities in preparation for the New Year just five days away.

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