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in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Edward Lee Hudgins, ed. *The Last Monopoly: Privatizing the Postal Service for the Information Age*. Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 1996. xxvii + 138 pp. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-882577-31-6; \$9.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-882577-32-3.

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Published on H-PCAACA (June, 1997)

The Cato Institute, a research foundation concentrating on public policy, has previously explored problems of the U.S. Postal Service; this volume of essays about privatizing the Post Office expands upon an earlier publication, *Free the Mail: Ending the Postal Monopoly* (Cato Institute, 1990). The essays in *The Last Monopoly*, chosen from papers presented at a 1995 Cato Institute conference entitled "Private Postal Service in the 21st Century," discuss the government monopoly of the postal service and propose solutions—focusing on deregulation, privatization, and competition—to current problems. The volume is divided into four sections: "The State of the Postal Service," "Competing with the Postal Service," "Market Structures for Private Delivery," and "Privatization Plans." The authors include employees and directors of various research institutes, politicians, lawyers, economists, and advertisers—in general, experts in policy and regulatory studies. The editorial "Introduction" and the twelve essays provide far too much information and far too many ideological stances to allow for a brief summary, yet a few highlights indicate the general substance and tone of the volume.

In the first section, Marvin T. Runyon, the U.S. Postmaster General, asserts that the U.S. Postal Service meets the customers' needs, even as he maintains that postal reform is necessary; he concludes that "America does not want a *different* Postal Service—it wants the one it *has* to be more businesslike and responsive to its needs" (p. 7). Making much stronger statements, Gene Del Polito states that, despite the administrative rhetoric of improvement, "the Postal Service is still a sick institution" (p. 33)—claiming that it suffers from a fatal immuno-deficiency disease. Considering issues of competition, Stephen L. Gibson contextualizes the regulatory issues of privatizing the Post office by discussing the technological revolution and

its effect on the transmission of information; he hypothesizes that the evolving regulatory discussion about the Internet may help to formulate policy for the U.S. Postal Service.

The essays in the final two sections explore the options, problems, and advantages of allowing for competition. R. Richard Geddes considers alternatives for structuring the private delivery market, contending that the "deregulation of postal services will result in a highly competitive market, stratified by speed of delivery, with a high uniform level of reliability" (p. 88). Michael A. Crew examines postal service systems in other countries and cautions policy makers to implement any change slowly and to avoid privatization. He considers several "less radical policies" (p. 99) such as giving the U. S. Postal Service more autonomy, establishing a price cap model, repealing the Private Express Statutes, and allowing Postal unions the right to strike. In considering plans for privatization, Dana Rohrabacker asserts that the Postal Service should become an employee-owned company. Douglas K. Adie, on the other hand, believes that privatizing the service while still allowing it to remain intact would not allow for competition. He argues that the Postal Service should be divided into five regional systems and then be sold gradually so that the market could absorb them.

Possible reform of the U.S. Postal Service provokes a strong reaction, and it is tempting to either condemn or praise this volume on the basis of one's own political stance. As a way of counteracting that reaction, the editor chose a variety of voices and solutions. The majority of the essays support either privatization, deregulation, or corporatization, yet Murray Comarow, viewing privatization as a problem rather than a solution, proposes other solutions to postal problems because he wishes the monopoly on first-class letters and nationwide service

to be maintained. Generally focused for an audience of economists and policy makers, this collection of essays contains much to interest theorists of communication. The McLuhan dictum about the medium and message comes into play with any proposed change to the postal system, and these economic discussions and policy proposals hint at the future of letters.

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Citation: Sarah R. Marino. Review of Hudgins, Edward Lee, ed., *The Last Monopoly: Privatizing the Postal Service for the Information Age*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. June, 1997.

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