

Arts & Letters

FILM

[Sicko]

Faux Populist Goes to Doctor

By Steve Sailer

MICHAEL MOORE'S comic polemical documentaries have done more for his net worth than for his political causes. He attacked greedy CEOs sending American factory jobs abroad in 1989's "Roger & Me," gun sales in 2002's "Bowling for Columbine," and President Bush's war in Iraq in 2004's "Fahrenheit 9/11," leaving him 0-for-3.

In "Sicko," he has his ripest target yet, America's ramshackle healthcare finance system. Having come down with lymphatic cancer in 1996, I am sympathetic to Moore's bias against for-profit health insurance. I may still be here only because I had the kind of generous insurance that few employers provide these days.

Moore's centerpiece example is a young man battling cancer (at the same age as me) whose request for an expensive bone-marrow transplant was denied. He died three weeks later. Moore blames his death on insurance company greed, although that brief interval suggests his condition was hopeless. If I'd needed a bone-marrow transplant, I'd have wanted the law to align incentives by requiring my employer to buy both my health and life insurance from the same firm. The insurer would then have had to choose between paying my clinic and paying my widow.

Strangely, "Sicko" misses much of our expensive but stressful system's black comedy, such as medical providers mailing out heart-attack inducing bills demanding we pay their zany list prices, apparently in the hope that an occasional senile patient might dutifully ante up rather than forwarding it to his insurer. For instance, after a two-night hospital stay costing \$2,000 according to the rate my insurance company had already negotiated, the hospital billed me for \$34,000.

Unfortunately, Moore's self-promotion, disingenuousness, and leftist ideology make his event movies more about Moore than about their ostensible subjects. "Sicko's" underlying goal appears to be to use our absurd health-payment system to persuade us that socialism in general is superior to capitalism, that innately evil tumor on humanity. That's not a debate he's going to win, so he's distracting from the reality that medical insurance is a big exception to the rule that the profit motive works best.

Moreover, Moore's faux populism gives him an excuse to dumb down "Sicko" and not bother to explain why the competitive enterprise system that's good at providing us with, say, life insurance is bad at medical insurance.

In truth, our dysfunctional tradition of employer-provided health insurance isn't a result of the free market. Instead, it emerged during World War II as companies slid past wage-price controls by offering free fringe benefits to attract workers. In other words, it began as corporate liberality evading government-mandated stinginess. Of course, you won't learn that from "Sicko."

The documentary's lack of economic sophistication could be tolerated if his audience really was as uneducated as Moore implies. Yet despite his trade-

mark obesity and bad clothes, Moore's blue-collar Joe shtick is just an act, as he showed in his gun-control movie "Bowling for Columbine." Moore's fans—urban white liberals—want gun control to disarm the minority criminals who threaten them, but they aren't going to admit that, so Moore concocted a fantasy for them about how dangerous those heavily armed rural rednecks are.

Similarly, Moore lovingly shows us in "Sicko" that the French upper middle class live more stylishly than we American slobs. And he seems most at home chatting with another pseudo-prole, the grand old man of English leftism, Tony Benn, who used to be Anthony Wedgwood Benn, the 2nd Viscount Stansgate.

When Moore ventures abroad to tell us about the wonder of the government-paid systems in Canada, Britain, France, and, yes, Cuba, his satirical eye deserts him as he descends into complete credulity: It's free! Unlimited care, free!

Sadly, nothing can be unlimited. When I had cancer, I made my insurance company pay for second, third, and fourth opinions. I hired an oncologist as my consultant to help me evaluate the clinical trials offered by three top lymphoma specialists. With his aid, I became the first patient with intermediate-grade non-Hodgkins lymphoma to be treated with a radical new monoclonal antibody that has since become a multi-billion dollar per year drug. I've been fine for the decade since.

Today, I suspect, few HMO's—or, contra Moore, governments—would pay for such a lavish (but effective) plan of attack.

Still, despite Moore's miscues, health insurance is the best domestic issue the Democrats possess. Why let them have it? ■

Rated PG-13 for brief strong language.

BOOKS

[*Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*, Bill McKibben, *Times Books*, 261 pages]

Price, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness

By Caleb Stegall

IN 1947, two titans of 20th-century economic theory, Ludwig von Mises and Wilhelm Röpke, met in Röpke's home of Geneva, Switzerland. During the war, the Genevan fathers coped with shortages by providing citizens with small garden allotments outside the city for growing vegetables. These citizen gardens became so popular with the people of Geneva that the practice was continued even after the war and the return to abundance. Röpke was particularly proud of these citizen farmers, and so he took Mises on a tour of the gardens. "A very inefficient way of producing food-stuffs!" Mises noted disapprovingly. "Perhaps so, but a very efficient way of producing human happiness" was Röpke's rejoinder.

Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future by Bill McKibben is essentially a book-length recapitulation and exploration of the Mises-Röpke exchange. McKibben's task is first to demonstrate the failure of established economic theory to provide an adequate and sustainable account of human well-being and second to develop an alternative paradigm that offers a more durable way forward. On the former count, *Deep Economy* must be considered a rousing success. On the latter, more difficult score, it is disappointing. McKibben provides valuable insight and important stories of resistance, but he would

have benefited from a more thoroughgoing appreciation of the insights of the communitarian Right.

Deep Economy begins with some simple questions: What does it mean to be rich? Is more necessarily better? Why aren't we happy? McKibben argues that while our preoccupation with utilitarian economics has produced unprecedented growth and material wealth, it has faltered when it comes to providing human happiness and satisfaction. For example, McKibben points out that the established measure of economic growth—the Gross National Product—incorporates perverse incentives for economic exchange such that the most productive (read "happy") citizen is "a cancer patient who totals his car on his way to meet with his divorce lawyer." Obviously, evaluating human welfare requires a more supple set of tools.

Far more alarming to McKibben, however, is that the "American way of life"—easy mobility, hyper-individualism, mass consumerism, and the commodification of all things at the altar of the market—has made our society dangerously unstable. "Peak oil" (the phenomena of global oil demand outpacing declining supplies) and global warming feature prominently in McKibben's argument. He likewise cites studies and

abundant growth and progress driven by a nearly insatiable appetite for the earth's accumulated stores of cheap fossil energy is nearing an end. It is clear that our political and economic elites are mostly in denial about what this means for our social order. It is clear, whether one buys McKibben's global-warming alarmism or not, that our sprawl mania is ecologically unsustainable, causing dangerous depletions of natural resources from top soil to water. It is clear that the financial sector is hopelessly overburdened with a legacy of cheap money (which means high debt) backed solely by the presence of cheap oil. It is clear that policy makers in Washington are intent on continuing to provide centralized subsidies to this stumbling behemoth thereby squelching the possible development of true alternatives. Finally, it is clear that as the billions of consumers in the developing world come online and begin to want and expect what we want and expect, the age-old law of scarcity will reassert itself with a vengeance.

Thus the age of "happy motoring"—as James Howard Kunstler has dubbed it—is all but over. McKibben is justifiably worried that the collapse of the postwar economy may bring down the tattered remnants of the social arrangements

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anecdotes describing Americans' general sense of malaise and unease, the widening gap between the haves and have-nots, our obscenely high rate of incarceration, and so on—all despite the continued growth of GDP. This litany amounts to well-trodden ground, and McKibben ably covers it again.

For anyone paying attention, the suggestion that our current economic and social arrangements are like a rickety house just waiting for the roof to fall in is not a hard sell. It is clear that the era of

(not to mention the ecological foundation on which they were built) that stood for centuries. The totality of these complex arrangements are encapsulated for McKibben in the word "community," which is the real subject of his book. Much of *Deep Economy* is taken up with the stories of those who are trying to salvage the wealth of true communities before they completely slip from living memory.

It is at this point that McKibben's assets as a journalist become most valu-