

IN PRAISE OF TICKET TOUTING

CHARLES EARL

Although a lifelong boxing fan, it wasn't until 1986 that I went to my first boxing match in the flesh; this was the Tim Witherspoon v Frank Bruno heavyweight title fight which was held at Wembley. At the time I was unemployed, and £25 — one of the cheaper seats! — was a lot of money for me. So what did I do? I bought four tickets rather than one in order to sell three, get myself a free entry and make a few quid on top. At least, that was the game plan. Things didn't turn out quite like that.

At the time, Frank Bruno was being touted in British boxing circles as the greatest thing since sliced bread, and that in spite of a suspect chin, doubtful stamina and a disastrous tenth round knock-out loss to the only half-decent American he had ever fought. Like most boxing fans I expected the tickets to sell fast and furious and bought my four tickets well in advance. If my memory serves me correctly, I had to pay a six pound booking fee for each of them. No problem

though, I'd simply turn up at the stadium early and sell the three spare tickets.

So I got there early, and realised at once that I was far from the only person with that idea in mind. The place was literally crawling with ticket touts¹ who were both buying and selling.

Now you may think, dear reader, that all you have to do to become a ticket tout is buy your tickets in advance at venue prices, go along to the fight, concert or whatever, and stand in the street and flog 'em, perhaps shouting out "Tickets, tickets!" or something like that.² It helps if you look a bit dodgy; well, I certainly look a bit dodgy and always have, being tall, dark and not so handsome. However, it soon became very clear to me that there was no way that I could sell any of my tickets to members of the public. I just didn't have what it takes. I might add also that the fight was far from sold out, and if I didn't get rid of the tickets quite sharpish I could well either have to sell them at a loss or not at all. Furthermore, the touts soon realised that I wasn't cut out for this too, and when it became clear that I had spare tickets, they began flocking around me like flies around a honeypot.³

Now I've seen scum. I mean the sort of people who spend more time in prison than out because they can't keep their hands off other people's property. I even recognised one person from elsewhere whose bare arms were decorated with the *de rigueur* prison tattoos of the criminal element: he was either a small-time crook or a hardened recidivist.⁴ But these men, these touts, were scum. Believe me. I've never seen such scum. One of them, an older man, on learning I had tickets said something like: "Well, give us them 'ere then." When I asked "How much?" he replied "Fifty pound for the three." I declined politely.

The most unnerving moment though — or what would have been the most unnerving moment if I were not made of sterner stuff — was when a small group of them approached me and one of them, a thuggish type, chimed in "Gimme those fuckin' tickets! Gimme those fuckin' tickets!" Like I said, I am made of sterner stuff, and in any case the touts were well outnumbered by police, but I could just imagine some poor little weasel handing over his tickets to this lout and not getting a penny for them.

Time wore on, and although I had arrived in good time I really wanted to get in to see the fight. So I found the best deal I could, a youngish tout, with a Scottish accent if I recall, wanted my three spare tickets for £95. This would have made me a whole £2 profit (less the price of my own ticket). So I made sure that the deal was struck and the goods exchanged under the watchful eye of one of the many policemen milling around outside, and I never took my eyes off the tout's hands as he counted out the money, but even so, he still managed to shortchange me.⁵ Then I went in to see the fight.



Economic Notes No. 70



ISSN 0267-7164 ISBN 1 85637 345 2

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 1996: Libertarian Alliance; Charles Earl.

Charles Earl is a freelance writer and researcher.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author,
and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its
Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame

Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait

Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

A short while later a Danish tourist took the seat next to me and I asked him how much he had paid for his ticket, which was one of the tickets I had sold. I think he said he had paid fifty pounds for it,⁶ and was obviously none too impressed when I told him that his ticket had originally been mine. I felt so guilty about this that I bought him a beer.

This incident put me off ticket touts for life. Like I said, I had never seen such scum and lowlife, and I mean that sincerely. What a way to earn a living. The one thing that I did find consoling was that the touts knew that I wasn't one of them, and although I've done some quite lowdown things in my life both before and since, I could never be one of them, and they and their kind did not and would not ever in a million years accept me as one of them any more than one of the idle rich — the Lord Lucan crowd, for example — would ever accept me as one of them.⁷ Actually, knowing that I could never be one of them made me feel good inside.

THERE IS NO PROBLEM

Some years later I came across reports of what my Libertarian friends would rightly describe as the harassment of ticket touts at Wimbledon at the time of the tennis tournament. The same type of lowlife as the ill-bred Scottish tout who had shortchanged me were reported as being a *problem* which had to be solved. The way this problem was solved was by arresting these men for peddling their wares, usually on some sort of trumped-up charge like causing an obstruction and, when they came up before the magistrates, making it a condition of their bail that they didn't go within a certain distance of the club. If they broke bail they could be re-arrested and remanded in custody. The authorities seemed to take great pride in this, and few people in high places would dream of championing the cause of the lowlife ticket tout, a notable exception being the Conservative MP Teresa Gorman. But what is all the fuss about? Let's take a good, hard look.

In the first place, we are told there is a *problem*. What is the nature of this *problem*? Simply that a tennis club sells tickets for £30, £50, or whatever, there are far more potential spectators than tickets, some people are prepared to pay over the odds, and others are prepared to supply them. Provided the tickets are not stolen or forged — and this is not a regular complaint⁸ — what is the problem?

The reality is that there is no problem, although there is never any shortage of phony complaints such as: "It's not fair to the *real* fans," which begs the questions: "What's not fair?" and "What is a *real* fan?"

Such complaints are most often heard in the context of football finals. The regular supporters who cheer on their team week in, week out are said to be frozen out

when their team reaches Wembley or wherever. Large quantities of seats are bought up by touts or opportunists and sold on at exploitative prices. There is a lot of rhetoric here, and most of it is more anti-capitalist than anti-tout, but what is the bottom line of such arguments?

Well, firstly there is the presumption that no one should ever sell or resell tickets at *exploitative* prices. Then there is the presumption that no one should ever make a profit without "working" for it (a typical socialist plea), and so on.

Okay, let's look at this rationally. Suppose a concert venue or stadium can seat 10,000 people for a one-off event but the demand is 30,000; obviously not everyone can be accommodated. Events such as cup finals, major tennis tournaments and so on are frequently sold out, often in advance. For an ordinary tennis fan it is just about impossible to get a ticket for Wimbledon, certainly a centre court ticket or a ticket for one of the more valued matches.⁹ Which means that whatever way you look at it, there are going to be a lot of disappointed fans. How then is it to be decided who will be disappointed and who will not?

The obvious answer is that the fans who are prepared to spend the most money will not be disappointed, which means that if a ticket for an event is £20 and a fan is prepared to pay £100, to a tout or anyone else, then he will see the concert, match or fight, while a fan who is not prepared to shell out that sort of money will not. Ah yes, but that is exploitation, the socialist lemmings cry. Exploitation of what? Well, the box office sold the ticket for a mere twenty pounds so the tout has made eighty pounds. Fine, then why didn't the club sell the ticket for £100 in the first place? We have often heard of tickets for the men's final at Wimbledon changing hands for a £1,000 or more. If this is the going rate then the club should raise the price of centre court tickets to a thousand pounds or something in that region. If that were to happen then the socialist lemmings would be complaining about this big multinational company ripping off the workers (bore, bore). From a socialist point of view they should welcome the tout — the small man — making a profit rather than the big corporations.

The point is that when demand far exceeds supply in such situations, a lot of people are going to be disappointed. In a free market situation, say a company manufacturing computers or bread, the extra demand will lead to rising prices which will lead to rising investment, economies of scale and perhaps eventually a cheaper product or commodity. In a one-off, transient situation though, like a tennis tournament, it is not a question of investment. The relevant factors — such as tickets for the men's final — will always be strictly limited, and many, many people will always be disappointed. If tickets to such events are not allotted on the basis of the highest price paid, how are they to be

allotted? On merit? But who decides this? Who decides that a fan or spectator who is willing and able to pay £500 for a ticket has less merit than one who is able only to afford the gate price?

Football clubs can and do reserve a certain number of tickets for important matches for season ticket holders; rock bands and other performers also operate similar schemes; but at the end of the day if someone has a ticket for an event and is willing to sell it to the highest bidder or for an extraordinary amount, there is no problem to be solved, unless some prat at Westminster thinks that a law should be enacted making it a criminal offence to sell any ticket for more than a certain price, say 300% more than the price stamped on it. Obviously the enactment of such a bizarre law would be virtually impossible. How would it be enforced?¹⁰ Would we have teams of undercover police officers hanging around football stadia in sophisticated entrapment operations offering to buy tickets from touts — or ordinary fans — at ridiculous prices? Would a special bureau for ticket monitoring be set up under statute to monitor the music press and to carry out special sting operations on ticket agencies? The mind boggles.¹¹

A FORM OF SPECULATION

Now let's return to the ticket touts, the dodgy-looking men peddling their wares to the public *en route* to the stadium. First I will deal with the character who short-changed me. When dealing with the likes of him one should always bear in mind *caveat emptor*. The only thing one can do is take reasonable precautions, like standing directly in front of a police officer when the deal is made. Not all "touting" though is done on such an *ad hoc* basis; there are reputable agencies who will obtain tickets for special events at exorbitant prices, and the likelihood of being ripped off by them is very small. Tickets are also sometimes traded through classified ads.

The real objection to ticket touts is, I suspect, the aforementioned socialist plea that no one should ever make a profit without "working" for it. Strangely though, this plea concerning ticket touts comes not from the usual socialist ragbag mob of middle class students, but mostly from "Conservatives". The reason for this is not far to seek. Certain upper class twits are revolted by the thought of tattooed wide boys earning perhaps several hundred pounds for a few hours work instead of by the sweat of their brows. The fact that they themselves may do exactly the same or better, by playing the stockmarket or by shareholders' "perks" etc, doesn't enter into the equation.

Of course, though, there is a lot more to ticket touting than simply buying tickets cheap and then selling them (to willing buyers) at a handsome profit. Apart from the contacts required, and the mentality,¹² ticket touting is a form of speculation. The stock claim of socialists

is that all speculation is evil, profiteering, an affront to humanity, etc and *ad nauseam*. The facts are very different. In the first place, the primary purpose of speculation is to make a profit for the speculator. If there is no profit to be had in speculating — whatever the field — the speculator won't do it.

All good and fine, you might say. On the other hand, if I buy a ticket for a concert and for some reason I can't go, I might gladly sell it in order to get back my hard-earned twenty quid, or whatever. But what if I don't know anyone who wants to buy a ticket? The answer is I take it to a middle man — a speculator. And isn't he entitled to make a profit? Let me put it another way, if I want to buy a new car — or whatever — I will very likely go to a showroom (i.e. a middle man). And surely if I buy a car from a showroom I will expect the owner to make a profit. Not simply because he has overheads to pay but because he is in business for himself and has a livelihood to make. By the same token, suppose instead I want to sell my old car. Again, would I really be surprised or angry if the local dealer were to buy it for £500 on Tuesday and sell it for £1,000 on Thursday? Five hundred pounds (or 100%) profit in a mere two days *sounds* like profiteering, but anyone who has ever been in business for himself will realise that things are never that simple. How is the ticket tout any different?

This analogy is near perfect, although it would be even more accurate to compare the ticket tout with a baker, because like a baker his product has only a very short shelf life, perhaps only a few hours, or a few minutes in the case of the man who bought my tickets.¹³ Let's consider buying from a tout too. Suppose I am a highly paid lawyer earning two or three hundred pounds an hour and suddenly I have an urge to see the Wimbledon men's final. I make a few inquiries and Harry the Tout says to me: "I can do you a ticket for a grand, guv."

Obviously I would prefer to pay a tenth of that, but what is the reality? If I go along to Wimbledon on the day I might, and I stress *might*, find someone who has a ticket for the final who will part with it for several hundred pounds. If I get this urge to see the final a long time before the tournament I might be able to obtain a ticket by placing a classified advert (which will cost me money and might bring no offers at all), or I might be able to pick up one cheaper by taking a day off work and scouting all over the place (which at £200 per hour makes no more economic sense than *moral* sense). Under the circumstances I cough up a grand and go along to the final.

As to Harry the Tout, well, he happened to know of an arthritic lady in her mid-seventies who won the ticket in a competition three months before the tournament. She is a tennis fan but the £300 he paid her for it is worth more to her than a long train journey to Wimbledon on the day, standing around being jostled by

boisterous youngsters in the blazing sun, and she'd much rather watch it on TV. What harm has the tout done? He has satisfied a rich man's whim, made an old lady happy, and made a few quid for himself.

There are, though, two other things to take into consideration about touting: one negative, the other positive. The negative aspect is that touting is speculating, and speculating involves risk. Some time after the boxing match I was in the Wembley area on the day of a Michael Jackson concert. The concert was sold out, so one would have expected the touts to have had a field day. However, there were rumours of forged tickets, and the weather was bad. If I remember correctly it rained quite heavily at one point. The result was that people were reluctant to buy from the swarms of touts, and they took a caning. I recall one concert-goer saying that at one point some touts were selling tickets for below their face value. When one takes into consideration the fact that a particular tout may spend hundreds or even thousands of pounds prior to an event, that for whatever reason many tickets may remain unsold, and that his commodity has only a transient value, it turns out that there is a lot more to touting than making a few hundred pounds for a few minutes work.

LEGAL WORK FOR PEOPLE OF NO CHARACTER

The other, positive aspect of touting is that, while touts are peddling their wares honestly,¹⁴ they are not engaged in other, far less honourable activity. I said earlier that the touts I met at Wembley were scum. And they were, real lowlife. That may sound a very unpleasant thing to say and I will not take offence if the reader draws certain unfavourable inferences from it about my own character, but this is a realistic assessment rather than an uncharitable one. Surely the reader has met people he would trust with his life savings and others he wouldn't trust any further than he could throw them?

The simple fact is that *professions* such as touting attract — often to a greater extent — the criminal element and the dregs of society. These are men with prison tattoos, often with drink-related and similar problems. Some of them even have great difficulty with their personal hygiene. In short, they lack character. They are not members of the underclass, but are beneath even that. They can't hold down ordinary jobs because no one in his right mind would employ them except for perhaps the most menial and lowly paid work. No laser printed CVs for them! What such men want is a comfortable life. They have no career ambitions and no pretences. They don't necessarily mind doing the odd bit of hard work — in their own way and in their own time — but you can forget about employing them in an office, anything which involves punctuality, and of course anything that in-

volves handling (other people's) money. It is such men who also end up dealing in drugs and in controlling prostitutes.

Both these activities: dope dealing and pimping, are also victimless crimes, and they too, like touting, should be legal. When such men are not able to make a precarious living touting, dealing or pimping, they turn, naturally, to other criminal activity. Indeed, they hardly have any say in the matter, for the means-tested social security system makes sure they have absolutely no way¹⁵ of rising out of the gutter to which they have been consigned by a mixture of bad genes, bad environment and bad luck.

While such men are able to conduct their business servicing willing consumers, they are not only performing a private service, they are performing a public one. For the only alternative for them is crime, which means more police officers, more prisons, and more deficit spending.

NOTES

1. For the benefit of those of you who have never been to Wembley Stadium, it is a truly massive place which, as well as sporting events, frequently hosts concerts. There is a long road leading up to the stadium from Wembley Park Underground Station, and at times such as these this is awash with touts, fly pitchers and hot dog salesmen. Many or most of these people are trading illegally, often with bootleg merchandise which, not infrequently, is confiscated by trading standards officers.
2. The preferred parlance appears to be: "I'll buy any spare tickets. I'll buy any spare tickets."
3. I suppose flies around something else would be more appropriate, but as someone who has always had the best intentions I don't think I deserve such a cruel analogy.
4. This man wasn't touting but was selling T-shirts or something on a stall right outside the stadium, i.e. legally.
5. He gave me £90, i.e. 18 five pound notes instead of 19; how he did this I don't know because I watched him like a hawk all the time.
6. I'm sorry to appear so vague on so many points but all this happened a long time ago and overall it was not a day I wanted to remember. On top of all this, Bruno, whom I was rooting for (for some strange reason), was knocked out in the eleventh round.
7. On a slightly different subject I think this is what *racism* is often about. Rather than being any sort of bigotry or prejudice it is about being accepted as part of the crowd, whatever that crowd may be. Hence there have always been certain blacks who have been instantly acceptable in white company and *vice versa*. One of the more outstanding examples of this is the legendary rock guitarist Jimmi Hendrix, who moved in largely white circles.
8. Purely from memory, there have been several cases of tickets for rock concerts and sports fixtures being forged. I don't recall ever having heard of tickets being stolen, at least not for commercial purposes.
9. Whatever is meant by that! I stress that this is largely anecdotal but the principle is valid.
10. Since I wrote this article, ticket touting has actually been made illegal.
11. Apparently this is now the case!
12. Both of which, thankfully, I lack!
13. And ripped me off into the bargain, never let it be forgotten!
14. Again, unlike the one I encountered.
15. No legal way!