

I just paid the Republic of Slovenia 1.511 SIT for a gift. Yup. My friend Jeffica mailed me a book from Chicago. He gave me that; it was a gift. I went to the Pošta to claim my gift and I had to cough up a Prešeren, a Plečnik and some animals. (That's Slovene cool talk for money, if anybody is getting this off the Internet.)



Jaka says "Hold on. That can't be right. That's like four beers. I'll call customs and see what this is about."

A few minutes later, he tells me "Uh, you have to pay, because your friend sent you a book. Books from the United States have a customs tax. You can't get the book unless you pay."

"But, it was a gift. Gifts are free."

"I don't have an answer for you. And neither did the guy on the phone."

Of course, he didn't. This is the sort of circular logic that bureaucracies thrive on. The answer to every "Why?" is a "Because." These institutions have an uncanny knack for turning reality into metaphysics. No wonder people feel like children when they deal with government channels.

I'm thinking "Maybe I just timewarped back to 1955." I could be importing some contraband dance manuals on how to do the Twist or the Chubby Checker. This could be some fossilized regulation to deter the proletariat from accepting juicy thrillers on supply-side economics. (My apologies to erstwhile communist police states, of which the former Yugoslavia may or may not fall into the same category.)

Recently, I was having a discussion with a colleague as to whether free newspapers had value. I said "Unquestionably. Their availability and the information contained within defines their value." My colleague thought so, BUT not as much as one that was paid for. We argued this point.

After now paying for something that should have been free, it made me realize that, yes, paying for something does give it an added value.

Tangentially, education in Slovenia—obviously—is given by the state, free of charge. My friend Luka is in business school here in Ljubljana. During an orientation for over 600 business students, a professor asked "How many people would like to start their own business?" Ten people raised their hands.

Is this the legacy of free education? An unspoken proviso that college is an effective way of eating up six years that might be spent doing something. Imagine the same situation in an art school orientation. "How many people would like to exhibit their work in a gallery?" Ten hands.

The book I received is called "The Vice Guide to Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll." A title of robust Western decadence. So here's my business proposal. For the price of four beers, you can come round and read my book. Whatever you remember is a gift. I'll be registering my company with the tax office as Fahrenheit 451, d.o.o. Look for future titles. ■