

As Frank Chodorov Sees It

BY FRANK CHODOROV

John Stuart Mill, says Professor Russell Kirk in a recent article in the conservative *National Review*, is “dated.” He was referring to the famous treatise *On Liberty*. The occasion for this dictum is the revival of interest in the treatise, by way of a couple of re-publications and the consequent appearance of critical articles.

When you say a literary work is “dated” you mean that either its ideas or the manner of their presentation are outmoded. In this case, the professor was referring to Mill’s ideas, not his style, insisting that in the light of modern thought these were of little force or value. Since I was brought up on Mill, and always held that Mill was a pretty good thinker, I pulled down my copy of *On Liberty* and reread it, just to see whether I too am “dated.”

Briefly, Mill held that a vigorous and healthy social order is one in which the individual is permitted to work out his destiny according to his capacity. . . . Political and social restraints on the individual, said Mill, tend to retard his development, and if carried far enough will induce an inclination toward servitude. Society, which is a collective of individuals and takes its character from them, will deteriorate accordingly.

This line of thought still touches a responsive chord in me and, therefore, I presume I am “dated.” And so is everybody else who is convinced that a good society will be achieved when people are free to do pretty much as they please, provided they do not please to step on one another’s toes. If you call yourself a libertarian or an individualist, whether you ever read *On Liberty* or not, you are in Mill’s camp.

The deficiency of being “dated” is shared by many ideas that are rooted in the past and, if modernity is the test of value, ought to be discarded. For instance, there is the Decalogue, authored some six thousand years ago

according to the Jewish calendar. This is definitely out of line with the “latest thing” in political science, which insists that it is quite proper and beneficial to steal from Peter and give to Paul. Very few up-to-the-minute professors maintain, with the Commandment, that private property enjoys divine sanction.

For another example of “dated” thought, I offer the Declaration of Independence. There may be a few philosophers in these nuclear times who accept the doctrine of inalienable rights, but the most forward-looking ones will tell you “there ain’t no sech animule”; and if you call upon the Creator to bear witness for the doctrine, they will tell you condescendingly that you are woefully “dated.”

So, the question whether Mill is “dated” resolves itself into another question: whether an idea has deteriorated in value simply because it contradicts “the latest thing.” The new might be shinier, but is it intrinsically better?

As I said, the article appeared in a conservative journal—which brings up the question, just what is a conservative? I imagine that a conservative is one who wants to conserve something—maybe something that is “dated.” At the time of Thomas Hobbes, in the seventeenth century, a conservative was one who did not want the “divine right” of kings to go out of fashion; in the nineteenth century, when Cobden and Bright were plugging for free trade, a conservative was for protectionism, and Prince Metternich was a conservative because he thought monarchism better than the republicanism then coming into vogue. But, what is a modern conservative? Some people who follow the libertarian

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line of thought are pleased to use it to describe themselves. But, now we find a conservative paper giving its blessing to a repudiation of John Stuart Mill, from whom libertarianism derives much of its thinking.

International Wheat

America has no monopoly of the farm problem. . . . Every nation whose government undertakes to “help the farmer” is plagued with this problem. “Enlightened” governments everywhere are knee-deep in the business of succoring the “poor agriculturist,” thereby making things worse for him and everybody else.

As this is written (on the birthday of George Washington who advised his fellow citizens against foreign entanglements) representatives of various nations, including our own, are assembled in Geneva debating whether or not to conclude a new International Wheat Agreement. They could readily solve this matter by dropping their respective interventions and allowing competition in the market to function as the equalizer of supply and demand. But the very fact that governments are assembled is evidence enough that controls will not be abandoned—not at the instigation of these controllers.

Meanwhile a group of atomic scientists, working under a grant from the government of the United States, are looking into the possibility of applying their discoveries to the improvement of agricultural production. Every agricultural school in the country, with subsidies from the government, is striving to increase the quantity and quality of the very commodities, the abundance of which—at fixed prices—constitutes an international headache.

All of this underlines the fact that whenever government undertakes to solve an economic problem, it simply creates other problems. This is because the laws of economics operate without regard to political “expediency.”

As [Albert Jay] Nock observed in *Our Enemy the State*: “Every intervention by the State enables another, and this in turn another, and so on indefinitely; and the State stands ever ready and eager to make them, often on its own motion. . . .”

On Automobiles and Houses

The economic year 1956 was ushered in on two sour notes: the building boom is showing signs of leakage, the sales of automobiles are dropping. The pundits have come up with the verdict that the country is “saturated” with houses and automobiles; the consumers of these products are surfeited, and production has to be slowed down accordingly.

Perhaps their analysis is correct. But one cannot be sure that “overproduction” has set in until one runs a bargain sale. And then one finds that what is called overproduction is really over-pricing. For, if the glut on the market disappears when prices are lowered you have proof enough that the desire for these commodities has not yet been satiated, that at the higher prices some people had to go without. So, before we can say for a certainty that everybody has more housing space or more automobiles than he wants, we must consider the possibility and the consequence of a drop in prices.

To a buyer, of course, the price of an item means its cost to him. A seller also thinks of the price in terms of what it costs him to produce the item. And one of his largest items of cost is wages, the price that labor asks for its contribution. A decision that too many houses and automobiles have been produced might well mean, then, that wage demands by construction and automotive workers have exceeded what the consumer is willing to pay.

Taxes are the second largest cost of production. The multitudinous exactions of the government—federal and local—on the builder and his suppliers must be passed on to the would-be home owner or user. Likewise with the automobile. So a decision that there are too many buildings and too many automobiles may be only the reflection that taxes are too high on those particular items. . . .

Whatever the cause, . . . all these are areas of government interference with a free market. And if a slump occurs in housing or automobiles, the government must bear the responsibility. Political leaders may well be concerned that these chickens of their meddling seem about to come home to roost.

