

The Function of *The Freeman*

BY HENRY HAZLITT

On the positive side, of course, our function is to expound and apply our announced principles of traditional liberalism, voluntary cooperation, and individual freedom. On the negative side, it is to expose the errors of coercionism and collectivism of all degrees—of statism, “planning,” controlism, socialism, fascism, and communism.

We seek, in other words, not only to hearten and strengthen those who already accept the principles of individual freedom, but to convert honestly confused collectivists to those principles.

A few of our friends sometimes tell us that a periodical like *The Freeman* is read only by those who already believe in its aims, and that therefore we believers in liberty are merely “talking to ourselves.” But even if this were true, which it isn’t, we would still be performing a vital function. It is imperative that those who already believe in a market economy, limited government, and individual freedom should have the constant encouragement of knowing that they do not stand alone, that there is high hope for their cause. It is imperative that all such men and women keep abreast of current developments and know their meaning in relation to the cause of freedom. It is imperative that, through constant criticism of each other’s ideas, they continue to clarify, increase, and perfect their understanding. Only to the extent that they do this can they be counted upon to remain true to a libertarian philosophy, and to recognize collectivist fallacies. Only if they do this can the believers in freedom and individualism hope even to hold their ranks together, and cease constantly to lose converts, as in the past, to collectivism.

But the function of a journal of opinion like *The Freeman* only begins here. The defenders of freedom

must do far more than hold their present ranks together. If their ideas are to triumph, they must make converts themselves from the philosophy of collectivism that dominates the world today.

A Lesson from the Enemy

They can do this only if they themselves have a deeper and clearer understanding than the collectivists, and are able not only to recognize the collectivist errors, but to refute them in such a way that the more candid collectivists will themselves recognize, acknowledge, and renounce them as errors. A friend of free enterprise is hardly worth having if he can only fume and sputter. He must know the facts; he must think; he must be articulate; he must be able to convince. On the strategy of conversion, our side can take at least one lesson from the enemy. The task of the Bolsheviks, Lenin once wrote, is “to present a patient, systematic and persistent analysis.” And our own cause, the cause of freedom, can grow in strength and numbers only if it attracts and keeps adherents who in turn will become, not blind or one-eyed partisans, but enlightened and able expositors, teachers, disseminators, proselytizers.

To make this possible, it is essential that there should exist a prospering periodical with the aims of *The Freeman*. We must restore “conservatism” and the cause of economic freedom to intellectual repute. They have not enjoyed that repute, in the eyes of most “intellectuals,”

Henry Hazlitt (1894–1993), author of Economics in One Lesson, The Failure of the “New Economics,” and other classics, was a founding trustee of FEE. Although Hazlitt wrote this for The Freeman in 1951, a few years before the magazine was acquired by FEE founder Leonard E. Read, the statement applies to FEE’s Freeman as well. It last appeared in the May 1996 issue.

for many years—perhaps since the beginning of the twentieth century.

“We are all Socialists now,” said Sir William Harcourt in 1894, and he was not joking as much as his listeners, or he himself, supposed. We must never forget that, in the long perspective of human history, “capitalism”—i.e., individualism and a free-market economy—is the newest form of economic organization. Communism is the most primitive form; it is as old as primordial man. Feudalism, a regime of status; rigid State and guild control; mercantilism; all these preceded the emergence of economic liberty. Socialism as a self-conscious “intellectual” movement came into being a century and a half ago with such writers as Saint-Simon, Owen, and Fourier. In its Marxian form it made its official debut, so to speak, in the revolutions of 1848 and in the *Communist Manifesto* of the same year.

And it was not, contrary to popular myth, the proletarian masses or the starving millions who were responsible for either originating or propagating socialist ideas. It was well-fed middle-class intellectuals. This description applies not only to Marx and Engels themselves, but to the epigoni, and to the literati who were chiefly responsible for parroting and popularizing the socialist doctrines. Intellectual hostility to capitalism was made fashionable by the Carlyles and Ruskins of the nineteenth century, and later by the Fabians. Since the beginning of the twentieth century it has been difficult to find an outstanding novelist or playwright, from Bernard Shaw to H. G. Wells, or from Anatole France to André Gide, who did not proudly proclaim himself a Socialist.

The late Lord Keynes, in the last pages of *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, a book not always distinguished for wisdom or sense, pointed out one fact that is profoundly true.

The ideas of economists and political philosophers [he wrote] both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.

The irony and tragedy of the present is that Keynes himself has become the chief “academic scribbler” and “defunct economist” whose ideas dominate the “madmen in authority” and the intellectuals today. The restoration of economic, fiscal, or monetary sanity will not be possible until these intellectuals have been converted or (to use a word coined by Keynes himself) debamboozled.

The Influence of Intellectuals

Who are the intellectuals? They include not merely the professional economists, but novelists, playwrights and screen writers, literary and music critics, and readers in publishing houses. They include chemists and physicists, who are fond of sounding off on political and economic issues and using the prestige gained in their own specialty to pontificate on subjects of which they are even more ignorant than the laymen they presume to address. They include college professors, not merely of economics but of literature, history, astronomy, poetry. They include clergymen, lecturers, radio commentators, editorial writers, columnists, reporters, teachers, union leaders, psychoanalysts, painters, composers, Broadway and Hollywood actors—anybody and everybody who has gained an audience beyond that of his immediate family and friends, and whose opinions carry kudos and influence either with other intellectuals or with the man on the street.

To consider this group of intellectuals is to recognize that it sets the fashion in political, economic, and moral ideas, and that the masses follow the intellectual leadership—good or bad—that it supplies. Clearly also there is a hierarchy within this hierarchy. The ballet dancer, say, gets his ideas from the pages of *The New Yorker*, and *The New Yorker* from some vague memory of Veblen; the popular leftist novelist gets his notions from *The Nation* or the *New Republic*, and these in turn from the Webbs, the Harold Laskis, or the John Deweys.

The hopeful aspect of this process is that it can also be used to revise or reverse ideas. If the intellectual leaders, when they go wrong, can have a great influence for harm, so, when they are right, they can have a great influence for good. When we consider the immense practical influence for evil that has been exercised by Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*, we should also recall the

immense practical influence for good exercised by Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. If the intellectual leaders can themselves be converted or reconverted, they can be counted on, in turn, to take care of the task of mass conversion. For the masses do respect and follow intellectual leadership.

Above all, we must keep in mind the rising generation, which will comprise both the future masses and the future intellectual leaders, and whose ideas and actions will be heavily determined by what they are taught today.


Few practical businessmen realize how economic and social ideas originate and spread, because they are not usually themselves students or readers. It is perhaps unrealistic to expect them to be. There is a necessary division of labor in society, and most businessmen have enough to do in improving their particular product to satisfy consumers, in reducing costs and in meeting competition. But one result of the preoccupation of business leaders with their own immediate problems is that they hardly become aware of the existence and power of ideas—conservative or radical—until some legislative proposal that would destroy their business is put before Congress, or until the labor union in their own plant makes some ruinous demand. Then they are apt to think that this demand comes from the rank-and-file of the workers, and that it can be answered by some statistics showing the smallness of profits compared with wages.

But usually neither the assumed origin nor the assumed cure is correct. The demands come, not from

the working rank-and-file, but from labor leaders following a suggestion thrown out in some college classroom, or by some radical writer; and the practical businessman, even though he knows the immediate facts of his own business, finds himself at a heavy disadvantage in these controversies because he cannot answer, and perhaps is even unaware of, the *general premises* on which the contentions of those hostile to business really rest.

These general premises, seldom explicitly stated or even clearly formulated by those who reason from them, form part of the climate of opinion in which particular radical proposals come to growth. Even competent experts in their special fields are usually not aware that some proposal they are combatting is merely part of a whole system of thought. That is why their arguments against it, often unanswerable in detail, are as often ineffective. It is a comprehensive though confused philosophy that we have to meet, and we must answer it by an equally comprehensive philosophy. Above all we must combat the superstitious belief that the coming of socialism is inevitable.

It is the aim of *The Freeman* to address itself specifically to the leaders and molders of public opinion and to thinking people everywhere, in order to help create a healthier climate for the preservation of free enterprise and the liberty and moral autonomy of the individual. It is our aim to point out the fallacies in the basic premises of the collectivists of all degrees up to the totalitarian.

It is our aim, above all, to expound the foundations of a philosophy of freedom. 

THE 50th FREEMAN

“I look forward to *The Freeman* every month. Its good writing (or good editing) provides a refreshing change of pace from the usual journal article. The magazine includes not only articles supporting freedom in the abstract but also, and especially, pertinent historical accounts, case studies, and biographical sketches. I find the book reviews particularly valuable. They cover not only books deserving the applause of classical liberals but also books that contrast instructively with the freedom philosophy.”

—Leland B. Yeager

*Ludwig von Mises Distinguished Professor of
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