

THE ECONOMIC PHILOSOPHY OF THE UNITED STATES: IS THE ORGANIZATION MAN DESTROYING OUR TRADITIONAL INDIVIDUALISM?

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The social philosophy and the social problems of almost any age can be phrased in terms of the relationship between the one and the many. This is nothing less than the problem of how the individual human being who in his physiological life lives and breathes and dies as an individual can also be a social creature who lives in a society of other human beings and has his actions determined in so very many ways by the pressures of that society.

Our problems of government, of social status, as well as of economic well-being, may all be embraced within this broad category of the relationship between the one and the many. Fortunately for ourselves, we live in an age and in a country in which the opportunity for self-expression by the individual citizen is as great as it has been at any point in history and in any civilization that has ever existed. At least this broad statement is true when applied to so many millions of us, as it may be in the United States of America and the Western world.

FREEDOM OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Since we live at such a pinnacle in the social development of the world, perhaps it would be useful to look back over the paths upon which our ancestors have led us, to see something of the manner in which these rights of the individual have been achieved. I think we may say that the individualism of the modern age is a product of the reaction against the rigidities of a medieval, authoritarian society. As various economic, political, and social developments of the medieval social system began to injure some individuals—at least in their own opinion—opposition to these authoritarian institutions arose.

Out of the opposition, developed the point of view which became the theory of the natural right of individuals. This doctrine was European in origin and European in its earliest expression. It gave rise to the governments which today we call democratic. In many respects, it became more solidly entrenched in the United States than elsewhere in the world.

For us, it was doubly fortunate that the great continent of North America lay open to the exploitation of the white man. If we can bypass our treatment of the red men—that dark side of the settlement of North America—we can state that the abundant resources of this great continent gave freer rein to the tendencies leading toward an individualistic society than occurred, even in Europe, where these institutions had their birth.

In America, in an age in which the ownership of land seemed to be symbolic of freedom in almost all of its aspects, the great abundance of land became equated with economic and political opportunity. This became a country of fierce individualism, and as this individualism expressed itself in many ways through the centuries, the free institutions by which we like to be identified today developed. These institutions, nowhere more deeply established than among the millions who became the tillers of our soil, guarantee to individuals freedom before the law, freedom for self-expression, freedom of religion, and freedom in the many other ways which constitute our spiritual heritage.

RESTRICTION OF FREEDOM BY SOCIETY

For many decades this system of individualism worked exceedingly well. However, as time passed, difficulties began to appear, as they inevitably will. For one thing, when only individual self-interest was considered, the vast resources of this continent in soil, minerals, and forests began to suffer seriously. Thoughtful persons began to be concerned for the economic future of a nation in which individuals, for their own private profit, could use and waste resources in ways that might make them unavailable for the use of future generations.

Furthermore, as the population of the country grew, and as additional facilities for communication and transportation were required, railways were built apparently for the sole profit of the builders. It was quite obvious to everyone else that the purpose of railways should be to serve the needs of a growing society. The difference was not at first realized. Since our society was so largely agrarian in this era, the dwellers upon the soil became the first and most serious sufferers from a policy of private development and management of these great transportation facilities. Yet, obviously the economic well-being of farmers and their very existence on the soil depended upon the availability of transportation which the railways provided.

How could the use and the abuse of transportation facilities be

harmonized? Could people enjoy the benefits provided without suffering from the abuses which seemed to accompany the benefits? As history tells us, the people on the farms were the first to decide that something had to be done about an intolerable situation. What the something should be was not clear, but nonetheless the agitation which eventually led to the development of what we now call the legal concept of a public utility had its origin in the protestations of farmers.

While these things were happening in the field of transportation and on the land, technological developments in industry were bringing about the growth of great monopolistic companies in steel and in other types of manufacturing. Competition became cut-throat between great companies, each of which had developed sufficient capacity to supply large markets, not only throughout the nation but throughout the world.

What was the underlying meaning of these events which were occurring in the latter half of the nineteenth century in America? In the first place, the processes of competition in the market place, as they had been visualized by some of the theorists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, were obviously no longer working out in practice. Also, social pressures were building up to a high point demanding specific levels of service and performance from businesses which had become very large.

The pressures of the many were being brought to bear on the one. We continued to think of the one as only one even if it was a great firm employing thousands of persons. Neither did it seem to matter that such firms operated with capital raised from the contributions of many thousands of stockholders. The mass production and mass transportation provided by our great industries and railroads tended to mold the lives of the American people into corresponding patterns.

We became a nation which did not work or live as individuals. Individuals who wished to get ahead in the world had to do their climbing inside great organizations rather than independently. From a social point of view, great pressures arose not to be different from our neighbors and fellow employees.

Did this development of a changed attitude mean that the individual's freedom to be different was being stifled? Did it mean that creative imagination was being suppressed? Must we as human beings be as alike, think as alike, and act as alike as the proverbial peas in the pod? Is the individual farmer or businessman, or for that matter, the individual academic scholar, an outdated antique?

BALANCING FREEDOM AND RESTRICTION

If any of these questions point the way toward even a shred of truth about our past, can we now do anything about it? Whatever we may think about this question, the collective forces which have modified our social and economic life are here to stay. Transportation and communication have inevitably thrown us together more intimately than ever before in history. For that matter, this is not only true of the American people but it is true, and is a source of trouble, throughout the world.

This, then, leads us to the further question: Is freedom, as it was conceived by the founders of our country, any longer possible in a truly operational sense? Is freedom merely a word that we continue to use out of habit derived from the past? Can anything be done to carry forward into our future the values which we sense and cherish dearly from our past?

Clearly, what we would like to do is preserve the best from our past—the initiative, the opportunity for creativeness—and at the same time to coordinate these aspects of individual freedom with the stability and efficiency of social order maintained on a society-wide scale. Is this possible without, as Hayek has said, permitting the social order to slip into authoritarianism?

Some persons, such as Hayek, believe that we cannot find a stable middle point between individualism, on the one hand, and an extreme authoritarianism, on the other. This point of view may, of course, be correct, but it seems to resemble too strongly a kind of black and white resolution of issues which is contrary to much that we find to be true in historical development. Rather, our task seems to be to recognize the difficulty, and to so direct our activities and modify our institutions that we prevent our society from being pushed into either extreme.

What we really want for ourselves is nothing less than the best of two worlds—the world of creative individualism, on the one hand, and the world of social efficiency and stability, on the other. Are they compatible? Can we create a kind of society in which we may achieve these two desirable objectives simultaneously?

This is the problem of the one and the many in modern guise. The answer to it is assuredly not simple or easily given. Rather, each of us in his own zone of activity probably needs to work out a resolution of this dilemma for himself. The mode of harmonizing these two diverse tendencies may be quite different, both in kind and in degree, in different areas of our total life pattern.

In many respects, avoiding the standardizing tendencies of social pressure may not be important. The integrity of my personality is not damaged by the necessity to dress in conventional manner. In such cases, resistance is obviously foolish. In other areas—those which relate primarily to the mind and the spirit—preservation of full freedom for individual self-expression and for free play of his creative imagination is of the greatest importance. Just how this may work out is, of course, a matter which no one can predict. The very essence of individualism and of creative imagination is that they cannot be predicted precisely. All we know is that when they flourish they have been the source of the greatest progress which mankind has been able to make. We know that they are the pearls of great price in human affairs.

Our history shows us that we do not achieve this desirable condition merely by removing the barriers of an ancient order of society which has become restrictive. Rather, if we wish to have a free society composed of free and imaginative individuals, we have to achieve it by creating a social structure which will encourage variability and creativeness. We seem to have a great deal to learn, and a great deal to achieve in this area.

Our educational system must do a very great deal more than condition students of any age, from first graders to Ph.D. candidates, to be mere repeaters of wisdom which they have learned from others. Rather, we must begin to instruct our children from the earliest age in the family and in the school system from beginning to end, in the joint responsibility of developing creative imagination and, at the same time, of maintaining a sense of personal responsibility for social order.

In other words, what we need to learn is that, in the modern version, the problem is not the one versus the many, but the fulfillment of the one through the many.

We speak today of the organization man, and we usually do so humorously, or even sarcastically. However, realistically, everyone of us must be an organization man. We must live our lives and earn our livings in larger social groupings which, in fact, are organizations if they function efficiently.

We may scorn the organization man because he is sensitive to the characteristics of the social groups in which he is placed. He knows whom to flatter and whom to scold. He knows when to be subservient and when he can afford to be overbearing. He can pick

the right persons to cultivate and to ignore. Not all of these types of behavior are admirable, but they are used because they work.

Perhaps all of us—whether we are placed at the top, in the middle, or at the bottom of organizations—need to learn more about the operational characteristics of social groupings. If we did, possibly the undesirable aspects of the behavior of the organization man could not achieve success for him. Perhaps the real core of satisfactory functioning within organizations, as the individual might see it, is sufficient consideration of others in the organization that all may function smoothly in the performance of shared tasks. Perhaps if all of us had better understanding of the psychological aspects of working together, which economic necessity dictates, our various organizations would offer less fertile fields for those smooth “operators” and unprincipled “climbers” whom we often call organization men.

The point I am trying to establish is that social pressures exist, and that the individual can be preserved as a viable and creative entity only within the structural frame of society and, in the last analysis, by society. That is, the functioning society really creates the individual with all of his potential for insight, imagination, and inventiveness.

To resist blindly the encroaching pressures of social control can conceivably be harmful to the full growth of the individual. What is needed in this respect is extremely hard to define and to achieve, namely a proper discrimination. We must strive to understand better both the individual and the society, for the two must certainly live and grow conjointly. To achieve this kind of understanding is a mark of individual self-fulfillment. At the same time it is proof that the individual is living within what must be classified as a good society.

CONCLUSION

I do not know what relevance such thoughts as mine may have for the great problems of American agriculture. If I have succeeded in making my central idea clear, you will be able to consider whether it has any significance for agricultural policy. I do have a “three minute” solution for the American farm problem, but it is so eminently simple and sensible that it does not have the slightest shred of practicability about it. The hard and slow job is for you. A philosophy does not solve problems for you; it gives you guidelines within which useful solutions may be found with enough hard work. But, to prove how foolish I am, I will venture a few opinions

which seem to me to be in keeping with the general social philosophy I have espoused.

I question whether preservation of the family farm is a viable objective of farm policy. With transportation and communication as they are now, I think separation of urban and rural governmental units is harmful to both. I think rural youth should be given authentic information about the economics and sociology of non-agricultural employment, just as urban youth should get such information about rural occupations. In other words, I believe the complete blending of rural and urban life should be a matter of policy. We should not be able to tell a farmer from a steelworker or a storekeeper, except perhaps by the shade of his end-of-summer suntan, and the cosmetic manufacturers have about eliminated that. Certainly, we should have no class or income differential. But, if all of this were brought about, you would have to look for different jobs.