

The BOOK TRAIL

— SIDNEY J. ABELSON —

"Political economy," says Alfred Bingham, "is essentially national housekeeping."

In that one sentence is summed up the peculiarly inept trend of popular thought on the subject of how men provide themselves with the material goods of life. The State has come into its own once more. The dignity of man, according to this doctrine, must derive from the dignity of the State. Socialism, after making Hegel stand on his head, is now standing on its own head: the heretofore despised State, with all its brutality, has become the benign monarch of a new day, a *deus ex machina* providentially sent from on high to extricate man from what seems to be a particularly unique imbroglio.

Bingham is not a Marxist. As a matter of fact in "Man's Estate: Adventures in Economic Discovery" (W. W. Norton, \$3.00) he unleashes one of the most sensible attacks on Marxism I have ever read. I have heard Bingham called a Socialist, but I believe he would even resent that minor designation. Yet he, like so many other courageous and intelligent thinkers, has fallen under the spell of Marxist-Socialist exaltation of the State. Under this latter-day mercantilism, society is no longer an organism but a machine. Men are not living creatures endowed by nature with the power of freely acting in concert with their fellows for the fulfillment of naturally established social functions; they are helpless wards of the universe, capable only of being directed like automatons.

Now political economy is no more "national housekeeping" than is chemistry or physics or biology. To establish political economy as "national housekeeping" makes as little sense as would the establishment of physiology as "national hygiene." (Paolo Mantegazza, the Italian physiologist wrote that "Physiology ... is, or should be, the origin of all hu-

man legislation.") A voluntary social organization can assist in disseminating the laws of physiology concerned with good health, but the observance of those laws and the enjoyment of good health are individual matters and necessarily must remain so forever. Political economy seems to have aspects of social interdependence which distinguish it from other sciences, but this is true only in a superficial sense: ultimately man makes his living—fulfills his economic function—with his own brains and his own hands; he follows or does not follow the "physiological laws" of economics, and consequently enjoys or does not enjoy the rewards therefor.

If we think in terms of humanity we must think in terms of individuals. There is no such thing as collective enjoyment or gratification; there is only the possibility of an aggregation of individual enjoyments. Political economy is a science which, like other sciences, reveals those laws of nature that permit man—i.e., mankind as a group of individual men—to enjoy better the economic possibilities of life. Political economy is simply a more inclusive science which shows man how the benefits of other sciences may be correlated.

Political economy is a science, and as such it has nothing whatever to do with national borders artificially established by man. As such, it has no relationship to the state, except that to a limited extent the State can be instrumental in aiding—but not in directing—the smoother flow of natural economic law.

In short, the State (politics) must subserve economic life. Politics is not the larger function; it is the smaller. In the natural order politics is the instrument of, and not the master of, economics.

In spite of Bingham's abiding faith in the State as the hope of economic salvation his book is as charming and as challenging a work on my favorite subject as I have read in a long time. These refreshing qualities are, apparently, reflections of the author's personality. His ardor is persistent, his sincerity above suspicion, his intelligence keen. His range of investigation is as broad as

the world. He has traveled everywhere he could hope to find a shred of enlightenment; he has spoken to many great leaders of countries in Europe and Asia. ("I had the chilling experience of being spat at as I drove through the noisome slums of Shanghai.")

He seems to have overlooked only one source of economic illumination, the one closest to him and most accessible—Henry George. Chapter after chapter is devoted to Hitler, Mussolini, Marx, Stalin—but George gets exactly 88 words.

Why? Perhaps because Bingham has not completed his investigations. Perhaps because amidst the shouting and the tumult the still small thin voice of common sense is drowned out. Perhaps because George is the most revolutionary of all social thinkers and his doctrine is a little too heady.

I have often thought that if Christ came to earth in this year of 1939 and repeated His counsel "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" and then added "I mean it," He would engender in the breasts of His listeners only horrified resentment. So it is with George. George writes of freedom and means it. He writes of free cooperation and means it. The economic and social doctrines of Henry George are not utopian phrases; they are the instruments of practical conduct. I submit that because George provides for immediate freedom as both means and end he is history's most revolutionary philosopher. Every other thinker has been burdened with the idea of a purgatory to be suffered before entering El Dorado.

Bingham's "national housekeeping political economy" leads him into a logical impasse. His feelings toward Russia are of an ambivalent nature. Russia is the best of lands. The Soviets have discovered how to step up production at a rate far outdistancing the "capitalistic" countries; that is the "love" part of the ambivalent attitude. But the Communist citizen is subject to arbitrary "blood purges," and Mr. Bingham finds "the political absolutism of the Stalin regime ... loathsome"; that is the "hate" part of his mixed feelings. The author of "Man's Estate"

sees no causal relationship between the Stalin economic system and what he calls "the demoralization that tends to grow on any absolute dictatorship." Looking to the future, through dark glasses, darkly, he ventures to predict that "Stalin, once his increasingly despotic regime has come to an end, will be remembered, like Peter the Great, for his building rather than his despotism. However one may abhor present-day Soviet politics, there is ground for having the highest hopes for a free and happy Russia."

In "The Conquest of Bread" Kropotkin states, "Every economic phase has a political phase corresponding to it." A free economy, in short, brings forth a free political system; a dictated economy brings forth a dictated political system. And not all the "angels in heaven above, nor the demons down under the sea" can "ever dissever" these causal relationships. As long as Russia has Stalin's increasingly regimented economy it will have to suffer Stalin's "increasingly despotic regime."

Only considerations of space induce me to relinquish further comment on "Man's Estate." I enjoyed the book. I recommended that every reader of *The Freeman* read it. It is a lively compendium of honest misguidance, a collection of sound facts and unsound interpretations, all so entertainingly and earnestly presented that, in spite of its shortcomings, it is still challenging to the informed reader. I think that the fascinating feature of "Man's Estate" is this: Mr. Bingham's attitude toward his subject is one of frank open-mindedness; he is still searching. And one whose mind is not yet closed is far from lost.