

## THE BOOK TRAIL

SIDNEY J. ABELSON

It is a matter of common observation that we live in an age more self-conscious about the abstract idea of freedom than any generation which has preceded us. This intensified interest results from an inescapable fact, namely, that the abstract ideal has become a matter of practical moment; the written formula is being tested in the crucibles of depression and now, ultimately, war. Ideals can no longer remain idle boasts; they must demonstrate practical usefulness or else travel the road to oblivion paved by disillusionment. This is the destiny of our times—to resolve the crisis which has arisen wherein man is challenged to prove the practicability of his higher aspirations.

Everyone pays lip-service to the ideal. Even the dictators labor their ideologies with asseverations that "true" democracy or "true" freedom for their peoples is their ultimate goal. It becomes a matter, therefore, of evaluating the concepts which underlie the interminable outpouring of words—in short, what do these numerous protagonists of freedom mean by "freedom"?

In many cases it is obvious that the concept of freedom is limited in application to a particular social group and implies a corresponding lack of freedom for other or supposedly antagonistic groups. "Freedom," Stalin style, for the proletariat means extermination of rights for all other classes of society. "Freedom," Hitler style, means German world hegemony, freedom of a kind for Germans and enslavement of all other nationalities. It is not at all difficult to appraise the conceptual workings of the dictatorial minds.

The "liberal" mind is another matter. One cannot probe its depths so easily, if at all. What the liberal means by "freedom" is something that cannot be defined, for "liberals" themselves, reserving the right to differ from one another on the slightest grounds, do so differ; and in the

exercise of their right to disagree neglect to investigate the subject of freedom beneath the superficial level of functional pattern, so that the question of how to enjoy freedom crowds out the bigger question of how to achieve and conserve freedom.

One thing can be said for the liberal—his intentions are far more honest than those of dictators. Though inept and ineffectual in his search for an explanation of freedom he does not employ the technique of mendacity in that search. Moreover, the liberal, historically speaking, has performed yeoman service in extending the boundaries of this search, and we are able today to engage in an honest and intelligent struggle to free mankind only because tolerably free institutions and an intellectual background of respect for the ideal of freedom provide a fertile, if a not too understanding, atmosphere in which to labor.

A typical but unusually ambitious example of liberal literature on the subject is "Calling America," a volume reprinted by Harper & Brothers from a special issue of The Survey Graphic. A number of leading liberals contribute their opinions—H. V. Van Loon, Dorothy Thompson, Thomas Mann, Felix Frankfurter, Archibald MacLeish, et al. Subtitled "On the Challenge to Democracy," this symposium attempts to analyze the problem of preserving the generally supposed *modus operandi* of a free society, but on the whole it accomplishes little more than an excoriation of despotism and an eulogization of democracy.

Raymond Gram Swing opens the discussion with the sound observation that "the individual is the basic unit of society, and the welfare of the whole is dependent on the welfare of all its ingredient parts," and then proceeds to embroil himself in the usual inconsistency of those who support the "Roosevelt Revolution" by listing as "a gain that will not be lost" the fact that "the federal government has assumed responsibility toward unemployment and impoverished old age." He fails to see that government, however humanistic, can never assume effective responsibility for the welfare of the in-

dividual, except in the same way that a prison warden assumes responsibility for convicts. The individual, as an "ingredient" of society must be free to provide for his own welfare. But it is not necessary for me to point out Mr. Swing's muddled thinking; he performs this job quite adequately himself. For example: "He would be an optimist indeed who saw that we were any closer to achieving economic democracy than we were a generation ago. We may be farther from it, since the concentration of economic power is much greater." In short, the net effect of the Roosevelt policy, as far as ultimate solution is concerned, is nil; and, though Mr. Swing does not realize this, this is because the Roosevelt policy, despite its humanism, fails to touch the basic cause that conduces to the "concentration of economic power."

But the reader of "Calling America" has an ever-greater disappointment in store for him. Bertrand Russell, the distinguished mathematician and philosopher, adds nothing at all to his reputation by contributing a chapter on "Democracy and Economics." He employs the technique of metaphysical discussion in the field of practical economics—and the result is nothing short of horrible to behold. He states a few obvious truths and then bogs down hopelessly in an effort to rationalize them. He repeats the lamentable mistake of those who advocate extension of government control over economic affairs, but in view of his great reputation, his culpability is greater than that of the ordinary commentator. His speculations on how to solve the economic problems are painfully obtuse. For instance, he proposes to break the power of plutocracy by transferring ownership of industry to a "democratic state," and he would do this by compensating the plutocrats with pensions of equal value to their holdings. He says further, "it might be possible to decree effectively that the pensions of ex-magnates should cease as soon as they took any part in politics." Shades of Prohibition! "Calling America," serves to widen the discussion of freedom, however inadequately it does so.