

This Thing Called Freedom

By Sidney Abelson

FREEDOM OF INQUIRY AND EXPRESSION. A collection of facts and judgements concerning freedom and suppression of freedom of all forms of intellectual life. **THE ANNALS** of The American Academy of Political and Social Science, November 1938. Edited by Edward P. Cheyney, LL. D. Contributions by various specialists. Philadelphia.

It is becoming fashionable these days to discuss "freedom" in somewhat the same spirit in which one describes the comparative virtues of two different types of overcoats. We can take it or leave it, and arrange our lives accordingly—the whole thing is a seeming matter of personal preference and the outcome of our choice a problem of planning the life of man with sufficient astuteness and cunning. Is not this man's world? Has not man triumphed over nature?

Few and far between are the thinkers who have had the wisdom—and courage—to penetrate this subject beyond its rhapsodic stage wherein the "liberties of man" provide material for lyrical sallies. Few indeed reach that profounder stage wherein freedom is noted not merely as a natural right of man as man, but as an integral part of natural economic law.

How refreshing it is therefore to read in the closing page of this volume that "freedom of expression is not merely a personal privilege, nor is it only a defense against tyranny of government or of any other possessors of power; it is a condition of progress. Freedom is positive; restraint is negative. An atmosphere of limitation, of restriction, is an atmosphere of sterility, of inertia. It is only freedom, both from external and internal repression, that favors progress. . . ."

Yves Guyot, in 1899, expressed somewhat the same idea, but with more elaborate connotations and with axiomatic vigor when he wrote, "Progress is in direct ratio to the action of man on things, and in inverse ratio to the coercive action of man on man."

The idea, of course, is not new to Georgists. Indeed, it is this idea which is largely responsible for elevating what otherwise might be a mere tax reform into a complete social philosophy.

Unfortunately, the summation referred to (written by Professor Cheyney) is not a characteristic theme of the volume. Perhaps it is unfair to expect that it should be, for the subject of the symposium is "Freedom of Inquiry and Expression"—that is, the resulting and not the causal factors, "objective" description, rather than "subjective" or critical analysis: and page after page testify to an academic shyness that restricts so-called objective studies of this sort to a sterile course of detached review. Despite this restrictive topical scope one cannot resist making the observation, particularly since a number of contributors note the importance of economic factors in determining questions of freedom or restraint, that it would not be beside the point even in a descriptive survey of this kind, to venture into the subject of economic causes and effects. This is a world of natural laws, as no doubt every contributor to this volume will agree, and if freedom is justifiable it is so primarily on the basis of natural ordination. Hitler and Stalin are wrong, not because they are cruel and despotic but because they are flouting the laws of nature. Throughout the animal world we can observe in each specie herds or "masses" following leaders, but never being driven by them. It is natural for man, too, to follow—voluntarily. Man is by instinct gregarious. He is also a hero-worshipper. He reaches new heights of achievement when inspired by superior men. But when, instead of following according to his own choice, he is driven involuntarily he brings forth the perverted societies of which

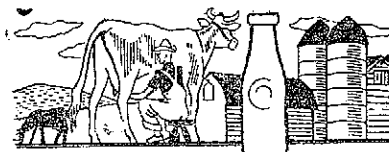
Italy, Russia and Germany placidly boast.

If you are even a little inclined to believe that the word "perverted" is too strong to apply to the "brutalitarian" states read the soberly and impartially written chapters in this volume devoted to Italy, Russia and Germany.

There is a long, factual account of Soviet repression—enumerating facts so stark, so concrete, so conclusive in themselves that one would imagine any trained intellect could feel entitled to use them as a basis for equally concrete conclusions. But the author of this contribution, Professor Philip E. Mosely, warns us in advance that "the purpose of this article is not to argue the question of Marxist determinism, but to examine concretely recent phenomena in this sphere of life, no less important than statistics of literacy or of grain production."

Here, possibly, is an important clue to the so-called liberal "objective" writers: the author, in the few words quoted, expresses an implication that the phenomena of freedom and restraint need an apology for being treated as if they were equally as important as literacy statistics. Yet it is precisely in those restrictive measures which Professor Mosely enumerates so convincingly that thorough thinkers will find the weaknesses of the whole Soviet system. The grand climactic paradox of the "strong" nations is that the measure of their strength is really the measure of their weakness; indeed, their strength is their weakness. Their pompous show of force is what physicians call a "masking of symptoms." The wasting disease is there, but a few doses of morphine transforms the decaying victim into a vigorous hero full of grand ideas—for a little while. What narcotics are to the human body measures of restraint are to the body politic.

In spite of its failure to penetrate more profoundly into its subject matter "Freedom of Inquiry and Expression" is a valuable handbook for all who are interested in realistic prob-



lems of social philosophy. It contains handy summarizations of various phases of the question of freedom, all of which are worth consulting. Of particular interest is the chapter entitled "Restraints Upon The Utilization of Inventions" by Dr. Bernhard J. Stern. Dr. Stern unlike most of his colleagues, does venture into philosophical speculations, but unfortunately his conclusions are hardly more profound than a convention-tailored political platform; he swallows, hook, line and sinker the whole doctrine of the "technological unemployment" school; he weeps over the "tragedy of displacement and the loss of skills occasioned by introduction of machinery," but he fails to take note of the fact that the same ingenuity of

mankind which brought forth that machinery is still available to develop new and even more efficient means of economic sustenance—if only the root source of man's economy, the land, were universally open to him. Men for the most part are willing to work for a living, and, by and large, they possess the wits to provide for themselves; but without the land (and of course all the resources included in the term) on which to work, their willingness and their wits, their brain and their brawn can achieve nothing more significant than calisthenics.

Dr. Stern is on much more substantial ground when he sets forth the facts and outlines the effects of patent ownership and suppres-

sion. His methodical presentation of facts serves to confirm once more the anti-social effects of a patent structure originally designed to protect and encourage the rights of the individual inventor.

We return to Professor Cheney who, perhaps because he enjoys the advantage of being editor or perhaps because his mind just happens to run that way, comes closest of all contributors to a realization that freedom is not a vague Platonic virtue but a law of nature. To quote him once more, and finally, "...the greatest possible freedom in the realm of thought and its expression, as in the realm of action, is conducive to the security, the prosperity, the progress and the happiness of a nation..."