

Frank Chodorov: Mystic

By JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

(Author's note: This essay is an abridgment of my introduction to *Frank Chodorov's One Is A Crowd*, The Devin-Adair Company, New York, 1952. It is especially submitted for the FRAGMENTS memorial issue.)

A LONG ABOUT 1935, America was blanketed by a literature of crypto-collectivism. Lenin said it long ago: to make collectivism stick in a land that has known the blessings of individualism, you must catch a whole generation in the cradle and forcibly deprive it of tutors who have learned the bourgeois alphabet at their mothers' knees. In a land of republican law this is impossible; no matter how clever or omnipresent the collectivist propaganda may be, a few culture-carriers of the old tradition will escape.

A recent preoccupation with my own intellectual autobiography has led me to reflect on the culture-carriers who brought me back to what I had originally soaked up unconsciously in the individualistic New England of my childhood. Those carriers are Albert Jay Nock, Franz Oppenheimer, Garet Garrett, Henry George, Henry David Thoreau, Isabel Paterson, and, finally, a man who sometimes speaks in parables and who always has a special brand of quiet humor, Frank Chodorov. He also has the intellectual resilience that one would associate with perennial youth.

A craftsman from the ground up, Frank Chodorov has always made his own words pirouette with the grace and fluidity of a Pavlova. Beyond this, he is one of the few editors alive who can make individual stylists of others merely by suggesting a shift in emphasis here, an excision there, a bit of structural alteration in the middle. But this is only the least important part of the education that one can absorb from him when he is expanding his own ruefully humorous way.

Listening to Chodorov, you won't get any meaningless gabble about "right," "left," "progressive," "reactionary," or "liberal." He deals in far more fundamental distinctions. There is, for example, the Chodorov-

ian distinction between social power and political power. Social power develops from the creation of wealth by individuals working alone or in voluntary concert. Political power, on the other hand, grows by the forcible appropriation of the individual's social power. Chodorov sees history as an eternal struggle between social-power and political-power philosophies. When social power is in the ascendant, men are inclined to be inventive, creative, resourceful, curious, tolerant, loving, and good-humored. But when political power is waxing, men begin to burn books, to suppress thought, and to imprison and kill their dissident brothers. Taxation, which is the important barometer of the political power, robs the individual of the fruits of his energy, and the standard of life declines as men secretly rebel against extending themselves in labor that brings them diminishing returns.

According to the Chodorov rationale, all the great political movements of modern times are slave philosophies. They are all alike in advocating the forcible seizure of bigger and bigger proportions of the individual's energy. It matters not a whit whether the coercion is done by club or the tax agent—the coercion of labor is there; and such coercion is a definition of slavery. Nor does it matter that the energy product of one individual is spent by the government on another; such spending makes beneficiaries into wards, and wards are slaves, too.

Chodorov is a mystic, but only in the sense that all men of insight are mystics. His mystical assumption is that men are born as individuals possessing inalienable rights. This philosophy of Natural Rights under the Natural Law of the Universe cannot be "proved." But neither can the opposite philosophy—that the State has rights—be proved, either. If there is no such thing as natural individual rights, with a correlative superstructure of justice organized to maintain these rights, then the individual has no valid subjective reason for obeying State power. True, the State can arrest the individual and compel his loyalty, but the rebellious

individual can always find ways of flouting State power.

Since the human animal must make either one mystical assumption or another about rights, Chodorov chooses the assumption that accords with the desire of his nature, which is to protect itself against the lawlessness of arbitrary power. He is mystical in the same way that James Madison and Thomas Jefferson were mystical; and he is religious enough to believe in Nature's God, which is to say that he believes in Natural Law.

The utilitarian argument is that Natural Law does not apply in the field of ethics, since it is not demonstrable that a thief or a murderer will always be caught and punished. But if there is no Natural Law of Ethics, then any system of ethics is as valid as the next—and the choice of fascism or communism or cannibalism is no "worse" than the choice of freedom as defined by John Locke. Chodorov's answer to the utilitarians is that men are diminished and blighted under certain ethical systems, whereas they flourish under other systems. And it is demonstrably the nature of man to prefer life to death, or to the slow agony of death-in-life that goes with slave systems.

Chodorov never labors his principles in either his writing or his speaking. Nor does he indulge in debater's tricks. He prefers a good parable to formal argument, and he is at his best when he is raiding the Old Testament to make a modern point.

Like all good teachers, Chodorov knows that instruction is always improved when it comes in the form of entertainment. What he offers in his essays as entertainment is, of course, worth ten of the ordinary political science courses that one gets in our modern schools. It is a measure of our educational delinquency that nobody has ever seen fit to endow Chodorov with a university chair. But his successors will have chairs once Chodorov has completed his mission in life, which is to swing the newest generations into line against the idiocies of a collectivist epoch that is now coming to an end in foolish disaster and blood.