Freedom Is Better

Too bad you never knew Grand Street and its cafés in the old days. The coffee was mostly milk, or it might be tea with lemon, served in a glass, but the chunk of sponge cake was quite liberal in size. The whole cost a dime, and thrown in gratis, whether you liked it or not, you got a dissertation on truth. You always got it, in polysyllabic dosage, from some co-customer who had established himself as the custodian of truth in this particular "coffee saloon."

Grand Street, on New York's Lower East Side, was no mere thoroughfare; it was the symbol of an era. Before Tovarich Lenin had got himself boxcarred into dictatorship *over* the proletariat, and thence into mummified immortality, Grand Street typified the eternal search for the Absolute—the Holy Grail containing the positive specific of the good society. In one coffee saloon the Sir Galahad of dialectical materialism would dilate on its inevitability to those who were already convinced of it, while next door a Knight of Kropotkin would diagnose the case of "direct action." Each eating place had

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its own philosophy—which was the Only Truth in every case—giving the impression that the philosophy and not the food was its stock-in-trade.

Characteristic of the Grand Street era was the certainty of each protagonist that only his doctrine was on the side of the angels, that all others were frauds, to say the least. Objectivity was looked down upon as a weakness of character, and questioning as a manifest expression of innate sinfulness. All of which gave life exhilaration and charm. People who are sure of themselves, downright sure, are always exciting. It is only when they abandon argument and proceed to "do something about it" that they become dull. In the Grand Street days there was a lot of talk about action, but you got the impression that for these delightful exponents of truth, action would be the most distasteful thing in the world. They enjoyed talking too much. Action does to a philosophy what a kitchen does to a beautiful woman, and then there is nothing to talk about. Action killed Grand Street.

Every doctrinaire dreams of "doing something about it"—of demonstrating his truth in the field of human affairs. If only he could try it out! There is no question that the good society is guaranteed by his mosaic of words, for he has checked and cross-checked it at every point and nowhere has he found a logical leak. It must work. It is truth. The obstinacy of selfish, ignorant, and sinful people who deny it is all that stands between the cure-all and the sick world.

Well, something was done about it in Moscow. To be historically exact, Grand Street, the era of dreams and discussion, was murdered on the battlefields of World War I, for there was nothing to palaver about after the Brest-Litovsk treaty. The time for action had come. Truth would now prove itself.

Thirty years of experience have somewhat diluted the Truth According to Marx; the promise of Grand Street has not been fulfilled, for Moscow seems to have fallen short of the expected Eden. Evidently there was a flaw in the mosaic.

When we go back over the argument, applying the Moscow experience to it, we find that the neglected and defective element in it is the human being. The basic assumption of the Moscow truth—and of every truth that ever came down the pike of social science—is that the human being is absolutely and indefinitely malleable. There is nothing in him that can resist the force of environmental influences. When he is fitted into the ideal mold, the institutional pattern of truth, he will come out the ideal man. He is the putty, not the sculptor.

From this assumption follows another, which is never expressed but always implied. And that is that some sculptor of society is needed. Who shall fill the bill? Quite obviously, one whose capacity for understanding truth automatically raises him above the level of human being. He is something special, endowed with gifts that are denied the run-of-the-mill anthropoid, picked by nature to do the work of truth. His anointment both qualifies him and puts upon him the obligation to "do something about it."

These two assumptions, absolutely necessary in Grand Street to make the truth stand up, tend to show up its deficiency when put to the test. At Moscow and Berlin and Rome the absolute truth came crashing to the dust simply because the sculptors did not measure up to the assumption of infallibility, while the human being denied the assumption as to his plasticity. *They* proved incapable of ridding themselves of the very inadequacies which *he* was supposed to shed in his new environment. *They* wanted material satisfactions without end and advantages

over their fellow men. *He* was not malleable, at least in his inclination to hold on to what he produced, and proved it by lying down on the job when his claim to property was denied; and *they* lost all their lofty pretensions simply because their resignation from the human race was not accepted. They were human beings, after all.

The spirit of Grand Street lingered on after World War I, even though sickish and apologetic, and kept cracking that "something be done about it." Between wars, the truth underwent some alterations, in the light of its European experience, and its perfection was undertaken by the London School of Economics and Harvard University. Statistics replaced coffee and cake. But the two assumptions that wrecked the experiments in truth were retained; that was necessary, for if it is recognized for a moment that the human being has something to say about it, or that omniscience is denied to the oracles of truth, how can one make "progress"?

After World War II, when the consequent confusion gave them the opportunity to "do something about it," the Back Bay successors to Grand Street set up their polished versions of truth in London and Washington. For the selfsame reason that truth failed in Moscow, Rome, and Berlin, it is proving itself quite fallible in a "democratic" locale, and despite its statistical veneer. Far from bringing about the good society, it is again turning out to be a pattern for disharmony. Even its advocates admit by constant revision that it is not what it was cracked up to be in the erudite Grand Streets.

The spirit of Grand Street is eternal; it never dies. For it is man's treadmill search for the key to happiness, yearning for the monistic principle of the good life. Every one of us, deep down, is certain that the "mess we are in" could be cleaned up

with one application of the perfect formula, and so anxious are we to get at it that a good peddler has only to buttonhole us at the propitious moment to make a sale. We are suckers for the infallible.

Seeing how the market is never oversold, this writer, a confessed Ancient Mariner, comes at you with, believe it or not, the truth and nothing but the truth. It is all wool and a yard wide and carries the money-back-if-not-satisfied guarantee. It is called—freedom. Now, counterfeiters have helped themselves to this label only too often, and since you have been fooled before, you may be inclined to pass my booth with a sneer. However, if you will but listen to a short sales talk, a few hundred words, you will realize that my elixir is genuine, entirely different from the ersatz you have tried.

First, I am compelled to violate the first principle of good salesmanship; I must talk about my competitors' products, by way of contrast. Take them all down the line—socialism, anarchism, communism, single tax, prohibition, monetary reforms, controlled economies, ad nauseam—and you find a common essential ingredient: political power. In that respect they are all alike; not one of them can stand on its own feet, not one can work without a law. When their proponents say "let's do something about it," they mean "let's get hold of the political machinery so that we can do something to somebody else." And that somebody else is invariably you.

Freedom has nothing to do with political power. Freedom makes concessions to the law, as a matter of necessity, but always with the reluctance of a child taking castor oil. The ideal of freedom is a social order without law, but since the nature of man is not prepared to live in so rarefied an atmosphere, since he will on occasion covet his neighbor's property, which

is a denial of freedom, it is necessary that the ideal be somewhat watered down with law. A free man is one capable of non-interference in the affairs of his neighbor, while the legally conscious man is consumed with a desire to control or dominate his neighbor. When a man says "there ought to be a law," he confesses his incapacity for freedom.

It is obvious that a free society is one in which the law concerns itself with minimizing the interferences of men in one another's affairs, and never presumes to interject itself; and it is obvious from that rule that freedom is quite unlike the various reforms that are being peddled on any Grand Street. Every one of them is labeled with a "legal directions for taking."

Freedom is essentially a condition of inequality, not equality. It recognizes as a fact of nature the structural differences inherent in man—in temperament, character, and capacity—and it respects those differences. We are not alike and no law can make us so. Parenthetically, what a stale and uninteresting world this would be if perfect equality prevailed. When you seek the taproot of reform movements you find an urgency to eradicate these innate differences and to make all men equal; in practice, this means the leveling-off of the more capable to the mediocrity of the mass. That is not freedom.

However, we must not be too hard on the spirit of reform. Every social integration fosters practices and institutions that deny the adequacy of freedom; envy, cupidity, and ignorance fertilize these weeds of the social order, and the impulse of reform is to root them out. But experience has shown that the law is ineffective in that purpose, that the law is in fact the instrument by which these iniquitous institutions came about. Whatever may be said of it as an expedient, as a steady diet castor oil is no good; the dosage of law is important.

The reforms will come of themselves, automatically, when instead of asking for a law we learn to shout, "Let us alone." For then we will have assumed the responsibility for our behavior; we will ask no favors, seek no advantages over our neighbors. We will get along with the capacities with which nature has endowed us and make the best of it. In the final analysis, freedom is an individual experience.