
The Articulate Individualist

“Nobody gives a damn *what* you write; it’s *how* you write that counts.” So said a friend to Albert Jay Nock; when he repeated the *bon mot*, you detected in his expression the pride of the craftsman and the disappointment of a man misunderstood.

It is only when you reread *Our Enemy the State* and Thomas Jefferson and his *Memoirs*—when you take his style in stride and are no longer dazzled by its perfection—that you catch the flavor of his thought and you plumb its substance. He was not a voluminous writer. He had the rare gift of editing his ideas, so that he wrote only when he had something to say and he said it with dispatch. When you use the right word you are under no obligation to explain because the right word explains itself; elucidation for the benefit of people who cannot read is cheap and futile at best. This standard of literary exactitude sets a fast pace for the ordinary reader to follow, especially when his concentration is being diverted from the thought by the style, and a second reading is necessary to catch up.

This was the lead article in an eight-page memorial issue of analysis dedicated to Albert Jay Nock (August 1946). Chodorov was forty-nine when he first met Nock, but Nock stood next to Henry George as an intellectual mentor. Also see Chodorov's chapter on Nock in Out of Step.

Nock had a very definite philosophy. He had plenty to say. Though he wrote on many subjects, from political science to marriage, from literary criticism to manners, a distinctive pattern of philosophic thought pervades all his books and essays. It is what we would name, for lack of a surer word, the philosophy of individualism. But, it is not a doctrine or theory; it is a quality of the man himself, elusive and somewhat mystical, but nevertheless rational and communicable. It is possible only to sketch in this limited space the outlines of his philosophy.

Individualism, as a social philosophy, starts with the axiom that in the nature of things only the individual exists. Even the world about him is a matter of conjecture, since its existence is subject to his consciousness. When two individuals cooperate for their mutual advantage neither assigns his consciousness to the other; it simply cannot be done. As individuals, each of us is born, lives, and dies—alone.

Therefore, that which we call society has no reality. In point of fact, the word *society* is merely a convenient abstraction, designating a number of cooperating individuals, and the character which the ensuing milieu acquires in our minds is simply the reflection of the characteristics of its constituent parts. If the individuals are given to heavy drinking we have a drunken society; a free society consists of individuals who are under no restraint by others; a slave society is one in which a few are masters whose bidding the others must do. The individual is the only reality. That being so, the good society of which men have dreamed since the beginning of time is a matter of good men. There cannot be any social improvement except by way of individual improvement, and any formula which tries to shortcut the process is fatuous. On whether the human is capable of indefinite self-improvement—there cannot be any other kind—Nock has grave doubts. Nevertheless, he is all for

giving men a chance at it, not only to see what they will do for themselves, but more so because as an individualist he is under obligation not to interfere.

The only obligation of the individual to his neighbor is to let him alone in all matters except when the neighbor interferes with his equal right to life and property. Therefore, while rebellion against repression is in order, the reformer with a "mission" is quite out of place. Nor has the reformer much chance of success. If he has something to say he ought to say it to those who will listen, but when he insists that those who do not listen are sinful as well as in error, he oversteps bounds. Besides, if people will not listen it may be because they are not prepared for what is being offered and the reformer is presumptuous in trying to force acceptance of what has no value to them. You can "put people in the way of learning," but you cannot educate them; that is a private operation. If the people are fools, they have a right to be and you have no right to disturb them against their will.

It may be asked, then, why Nock speaks in such high praise of Henry George, who was very definitely a reformer with a "mission." Those who are familiar with what Nock has to say on this point will recall that he protests a lifelong dissociation from the George "movement," and that he deplores George's reduction of his philosophy to a political nostrum. But, as in your reading you must learn to pick the good out of a book and throw the rest away—a favorite expression of his—so you must gather knowledge wherever you find it and not judge it by its presentation. Henry George enabled him to evaluate the state.

The individualist has one enemy: the state. As a scholar it was incumbent on Nock to look into the nature and equipment of this enemy, so as to show it up for what it is. He finds that this political institution originates in robbery and thrives on it.

But, what is the technique by which it carries on its business? In the first place, the state's predatory income is taxation; in the second, it gains comfort and aid from those to whom it dishes out privilege, at the expense of producers; in the third place, the principal privilege which it supports, by force, is the one which in the long run absorbs the productive power of the working population, that is, the privilege of demanding a fee for the use of the earth. Well, when Henry George advocates the abolition of taxes, he is hitting the state at its vitals. And when he further demonstrates how community collection of rent will abolish the basic privilege, thus destroying the exploitative power of monopoly, he gives you the main ingredient of that economic freedom without which political freedom is a mirage.

Without this understanding of the economic implementation of the state, the argument against it is one-sided. It is because of that lack that theoretical anarchism drifted into communism, the most vicious form of statism; and individualism which ignores the basic economic principles of Henry George is too likely to become that "rugged" kind which is nothing but legalized buccaneering. So Nock takes his economics from the philosopher, because without it he cannot round out his argument against the state, and passes up the reformer.

But what does the individualist propose to "do about it"? Nothing; that is, if by "doing" is meant commotion, organization, political action. That kind of "doing" is unwarranted by his basic premise. The ingredients of our social order determine its character, and if these ingredients are unprepared for freedom, incapable of understanding what it is, what can one do about it? There is strong reason to believe that such incompetence is widespread; in fact, that competence in this regard is very scarce. In spite of the aphorism that "all men are

born equal," nature very specifically abhors uniformity. It is obvious that there are some men who, regardless of their backgrounds and environments, are more plentifully endowed with intellectual curiosity than others; that the proportion of this unexplainable "intellectual elite" to the number who are content to grub along is small; and that its cultural standards cannot be generally applied.

What hope is there for a stateless society? If by an accident of nature this "remnant" does run up as a proportion of the population, it may make its influence felt. Maybe a complete collapse of our civilization, brought about by the crushing weight of statism, will throw the "intellectual elite" into the ascendancy, as a last resort, and some good will come of it. In the meantime, the only thing anyone can "do" is to go to work on the one unit he can improve, the only one he has a right to tackle—himself.

Whether this is a negative and pessimistic point of view is beside the point. Does it accord with historical fact? Does it check with experience? Only by this test can its soundness be evaluated.

But, it is very definitely not the point of view of a misanthrope. Far from it. Any self-improvement which the individual does effect is a gain not only for himself but also for those with whom he comes into contact. Say he makes of himself a better keeper of bees, a more reliable banker, a more finished actor, does he not add to the fund of satisfaction by which men live? Every man becomes his brother's keeper by way of self-improvement, and it is the only way.

"I believe," Nock used to say, "that we are put on this earth to have some fun." He had lots of it; he found it in himself, where each of us must find it. Neither gadgets nor money nor

acclaim interested him. A good book, congenial friends, a lofty discussion, a helping hand to a worthwhile person, how else can one find happiness? Speaking of the New Deal, he would say, "The one thing Franklin cannot take from me is my memories." He did a good job with his life.