

The Unreality of Expediency

by Frank Chodorov

Between the fellow who insists on judging every experience in the light of principle, rather than from the point of view of expediency, and the one who refuses to look behind the scenes and calls himself a realist, there will always be a never-ending argument. Using the terms in their popular, rather than philosophical, sense, the idealist (or intransigent) toward whom the realist (or pragmatist) is rather scornful, has a better claim to an understanding of the reality of things than has his opponent. That is, if reality is measured in ultimate results.

The realist finds protection from hobgoblins by pulling the blanket over his head; the idealist turns on the light and looks under the bed.

The realist accepts what is as the stepping-stone for whatever advance he hopes to make. The status cannot be denied, regardless of how it happened to be. He treats it as the only reality and proceeds from there. But the unreality of that position unfolds in its own consequences; for if the status is a mass of shifting sand, that which is built upon it is doomed to collapse. Security cannot be based on insecurity.

To which the realist replies: the problem of meeting the present exigency permits no course based upon principle. "We are faced with a fact not a theory", is the aphorism.

Quite true. The idealist also recognizes the incongruity between what should be done and what must be done, between principle and the necessities of life. Sometimes, as in the case of Socrates, existence itself is forfeit to the principle. In a similar position is one who, following out the principle of natural rights (that is, if he accepts it as basic), refuses to take up arms against his fellow man; or the worshipper of God as the principle of goodness whose faith is unimpaired by the prevalence of evil in God's world.

But even if he chooses to accept a forced agreement with environment, rather than hopelessly to revolt against it, the idealist does not compromise his principle. Nor is it sophistry when he argues that acceptance of the agreement enables him to further the principle itself. His choice may be criticized on the score of judgment or of courage; but so long as he recognizes the contradiction between behavior and principle, and guides his thinking and his life along the pattern of principle as closely as conditions permit, his integrity can hardly be questioned.

It is when he rationalizes his compromise, and twists the principle into its opposite in order to salve his conscience and flatter his ego, that he loses caste; it is then that the idealist becomes a realist.

For instance, taxation is legalized robbery; the idealist, rather than become ineffectual through incarceration or by asceticism, permits himself to be robbed in order that as a member of society he may call its attention to the robbery. The realist, on the other hand, accepts taxation without question and tries to find a perfect system of taxation; which is completely unrealistic because nothing perfect can be built on a rotten base.

The private appropriation of rent is a denial of the inalienable right of all men to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The intransigent insists upon that principle even though he must suffer along with his fellow-men the consequences of the private appropriation of rent. He could withdraw from society to avoid doing so; or he might choose to become a rent collector himself and use the proceeds to further knowledge and acceptance of the principle. He never rejects or questions its validity. The expedient fellow, on the other hand, hopes to find within the scheme of land monopoly a way to obtain the inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, a procedure which is quite impossible, and therefore unreal.

War is the product of an economy of poverty. The idealist, whether he refuses to bear arms or enlists for the immediate purpose of protecting his fireside, never loses sight of the cause of war. His thinking remains real. On the other hand, the realist seeks refuge from the reality of principle by denying it "for the duration" in order to justify his enthusiasm for a particular war; or he may conveniently reject what he formerly accepted in the light of "new evidence."

It all sums up to this: The idealist is always true to himself; the realist is true to nothing but expediency, which is ephemeral and therefore unreal.

(Editorial in the November, 1941 issue of The Freeman)

No doubt, fanatical enthusiasts for the "single tax," who see it not as a regimen to build up the social body in increasing degrees to a state of health but as a magical elixir to be swallowed in one gulp, have alienated potential sympathizers of more sober temperament. But the Georgist vision is not, as some of its adherents' rhetoric might lead one to conclude, inherently simplistic. Their veritably evangelical fervor, although it might superficially appear almost ludicrous in the context of advocating a tax, ought not be viewed with condescension or disdain. For the tax they advocate is a tax in name only, and its significance as a fiscal measure pales beside its significance as an engine of social justice.

— Robert V. Andelson