

The Free Market:
*The Arena of Individual
and Social Growth**

By OSCAR B. JOHANNSEN

COULD ANY MAN in 1776, though he were possessed with the prophetic imagination and insight of a Jules Verne, have possibly foreseen that within the relatively short time-span of 200 years, so great were the accomplishments and benefits which were brought into being as the result of establishing a society predicated on the principles of a free market that a civilization unique in the annals of history could arise?

To ask the question is to answer it. No man could be expected to have anticipated the inventions and growth of knowledge which were sparked by the free enterprise system. As but one example, the development of the simple agricultural tools of colonial days into sophisticated planting and harvesting devices permitted the production of goods on such an enormous scale as to invalidate the Malthusian theory. No man would have dared predict that men would be able to speak and see one another over electronic waves though situated thousands of miles apart. No man would have dared predict that men could actually develop heavier than air machines which would permit them to navigate the ocean of air surrounding the earth with the same freedom and elan of the birds.

To recite the inventions and techniques which arose because of the free market economy would be an almost endless task, so numerous are they. But important and invaluable as these benefits are, they are dwarfed by the opportunities which the free market principles provided. Under the free market, men of all walks of life were permitted to develop their innate capacities without regard to the station of life they occupied, their religious beliefs, their race, or any other consideration as long as their activities harmed no one. No great scientist, but rather two bicycle mechanics, by the name of Wright, invented the airplane. Though recognized authority had "proven" that such was impossible, they persevered. No autocratic authorities interfered with their right to attempt the im-

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possible for the essence of the free market is the right of an individual to make a fool of himself. But more often than not, the history of these "fools" has been that under the milieu of the free market many of them have created something of beauty or value.

The free market economy in America released the energies not only of extraordinary people but of huge numbers of ordinary men and women. This release of energy, unencumbered by governmental restraints, erupted in a flame of creative effort which became the lighthouse of new ideas, new inventions, new works of art which helped spark the activities of those native geniuses we recognize today. In the political arena the development of such great statesmen devoted to individual liberty as Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln was nurtured. Their economic backgrounds were poles apart. Jefferson was born into the aristocracy of his time. Lincoln was born into the class of struggling poor of his day. But both under the influence of the free market in ideas brought into being by the free economy helped to assure to the individual that freedom so necessary for material, intellectual and spiritual growth.

Humanitarianism attained a new dimension for it became an activity not only of the wealthy, which was the case in the closed societies of Europe, but of plain people who had obtained a financial independence which permitted them to give aid to their less fortunate fellowmen. Such activity reached fruition in the work of such people as Clara Barton in the establishment of the American Red Cross.

Not only did the free market stimulate the native genius of men, ordinary and extraordinary, so as to yield material blessings to the millions rather than the few, but it gave impetus to those cultural and spiritual values which raise men above the animals to such a high degree that the difference between men and the animals attains the difference almost of kind.

But of all the benefits which flowed from the free market principle, the greatest by far is the granting to the individual that freedom of conscience, freedom of effort, freedom from governmental oppression that permits each man and woman to nurture the inborn capacities with which he or she has been born in whatever direction desired. In the development of one's capacities to the fullest extent possible, the individual attains as an end that happiness which Aristotle said all men seek, a happiness which makes of life a truly memorable and worthwhile experience.

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