



The Vital Factor in Liberty

By E. P. MIDDLETON

Elements of Libertarian Leadership by Leonard E. Read
(Foundation for Economic Education, New York, 1962)

"LIBERTY is not helped or harmed by knowledge of a mathematical formula or how to raise beef or bake bread or repair a motor. But dispense with justice, integrity and other primary virtues, and liberty cannot exist."

"We hold from God the gift that includes all others. This gift is life — physical, intellectual and moral life . . . He has provided us with a collection of marvellous faculties, and has put us in the midst of a variety of natural resources . . .

"Life, faculties, production in other words, individuality, liberty, property — this is man . . . These three gifts from God precede all human legislation and are superior to it. Life, liberty and property do not exist because men have made laws; it was the fact that life, liberty and property existed beforehand that caused man to make laws in the first place."

The second of the above quotations is from Frederick Bastiat's *The Law*. The first is from Leonard E. Read's book *Elements of Libertarian Leadership*, in which Bastiat's quotation also appears.

Mr. Read's book is a remarkable and, in many ways, a very valuable contribution to liberal thought. It is also, for reasons which will become clear in the course of this review, a disappointing book. Mr. Read is the author of several books and innumerable pamphlets; he is also President of the Foundation for Economic Education, established in 1946 in New York, and a regular contributor to its journal *The Freeman*, described as "a monthly magazine of ideas on liberty."

"The Foundation for Economic Education," says *The Freeman*, "is a non-political, non-profit educational champion of private property, the free market, the profit-and-loss system and limited government." It is sustained by voluntary donations. With this sort of background, Mr. Read would seem to be well qualified to speak and write on the subject of liberty, as indeed, with certain reservations, he is.

In *Elements of Libertarian Leadership*, Mr. Read attempts three main tasks. The first is to make an analysis of what liberty means, the second is to show the importance of individual integrity and self-knowledge in the understanding of liberty; the third is to devise a method by which the individual who has arrived at this understanding may equip himself for the task of leadership in the fight, between liberty and authoritarianism.

The term "libertarian" is used, Mr. Read tells us, because "nothing better has been found to replace "liberal", a

term that has been most successfully appropriated by contemporary authoritarians. As long as "liberal" meant liberation from the authoritarian state, it was a handy and useful generalisation. It has come to mean little more than State liberality with other people's money."

"Liberty," he says in a foreword, "like *laissez-faire* is often thought of as synonymous with *unrestrained action*. The thought is incorrect as related to both terms. Liberty, for instance, does not and cannot include any action, regardless of sponsorship, which lessens the liberty of a single human being. To argue contrarily is to claim that liberty can be composed of liberty negations. Patently absurd! Unrestraint carried to the point of impairing the liberty of others is the exercise of license, not liberty. To minimise the experience of license is to maximise the area of liberty. Ideally, government would restrain license, not indulge in it; make it difficult, not easy; disgraceful, not popular. A government that does otherwise is licentious, not libertarian."

In his first chapter, "Faith and Freedom," he says: "All but a few freedom devotees believe in limited government, that is, a formal, legal agency of society which invokes a common justice, and secures the rights of all men by restricting such destructive actions as fraud, violence and predation. Is freedom something that can be had for nothing? For casual effort? Is it a prize to be won by delegating the chore to some hired hands? Or is the price of freedom an intellectual and spiritual renaissance with all the hard thinking and difficult introspection required to energise such a revolution in thinking?"

And thus Mr. Read shows us the direction his book is to take. The winning of freedom is a "restoration job," it must be "re-established from fundamental principles." And this cannot be done without an intellectual and spiritual renaissance in the individual. For "man needs to be free in order that he may fulfil the demands of his own nature."

Not unnaturally, therefore, Mr. Read's book is occupied with the proposition that man must, after accepting the philosophical basis of freedom, strive first of all for its realisation within himself. There has been far too much exhortation, banner-waving and slogan-yelling in the name of liberty, for all of which today we have only the frightening prospect of less and less of it. Not unnaturally, also, Mr. Read's approach is essentially a religious one, though not, it must be clearly stated, a



sectarian one. It is not even necessarily a Christian approach, though few Christians would find any of Mr. Read's conclusions inconsistent with their faith and creed. This is his interpretation, for instance, of the Declaration of Independence:

"[Men] . . . 'are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights: that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness . . .' This, quite obviously, is a political concept with tremendous spiritual overtones. Indeed, this concept is at once spiritual, political and economic. It is spiritual in proclaiming the Creator as the endower of men's rights and, thus, as sovereign. It is political in the sense that such an acknowledgment implicitly denies the State as endower of men's rights and thus the State is not sovereign. And this is an economic concept because it follows from a man's inherent right to life that he has a right to sustain his life, the sustenance of life being nothing more nor less than the fruits of one's own labour.

"Unless," he says, "we believe that man's rights are endowments of our Creator and, therefore, inalienable, we must conclude that the rights to life and liberty derive from some human collective and that they are alienable, being at the disposal of the collective will. There is no third alternative; we believe in the one or we submit to the other. If the latter, there is no freedom in the social sense; there is despotism. If we lack this spiritual faith, our rights to life and liberty are placed on the altar of collective caprice and they must suffer whatever fate the political apparatus dictates. The record clearly shows what this fate is. Russia is the most degraded example, but practically every other nation, including our own, drifts in Russia's direction. Among the Russians we note that freedom of choice has been forcibly lifted from the individual and shifted to the political collective. The dictator and his henchmen prescribe the manner in which the fruits of the citizen's labour shall be expanded and how his life shall be lived."

Mr. Read's thesis is that freedom has no meaning outside the community of free men. Man must know and experience freedom as a personal "release" and he can only do this in a society that recognises the unity of man's origins — in God, the Creator, the Divine Principle, Infinite Consciousness, or what you will — and, therefore, of his rights, which are his *inalienably* and not to be granted or removed by any man-made institution. How timely and urgent his argument is, he stresses in discussing the way in which individual liberty has been steadily eroded in recent times, not merely in the Iron Curtain countries but in all countries, not least our own. "We can measure," says Read, "the average citizen's loss of freedom of choice as it relates to the fruits of his own labour. During the past twelve decades, by reason of government expansion, his freedom of choice has de-

clined from 97.5 per cent. to about 65 per cent. and the trend grows apace. In other words, taxation which took only 2.5 per cent. of earned income now deprives us of about 35 per cent."

A large part of the book is devoted to "methodology," by which those who feel inspired to take up action in the libertarian cause may improve themselves and their technique in leadership and the like.

Comes the disappointment. You may read this book from cover to cover — and derive much good therefrom — without sighting, in any significant context, the word "land." It is a matter for astonishment, to this reviewer at least, that a man of Mr. Read's obvious knowledge, intelligence, wide reading and original thinking, in the field of political economy as much as in any other, can discuss the proposition that man's rights to life, liberty and the full enjoyment of the fruits of his labour are inalienable and universal, without realising that the sole source of his ability to satisfy these rights is nature, or, in economic terms, land; and that, so long as the right of private pre-emption of land remains, neither liberty nor justice are possible. There is no sign anywhere of the recognition of the vital economic and moral distinction between the gifts of nature and the products of man.

Mr. Read's economic authorities are, it seems, the Vienna School — of the marginal utility theory of production — the latest exponent of which is probably Hayek (see his *Road to Serfdom*). Mr. Read is infatuated with the idea of freedom in trade, enraptured by the vision of a free trading world. Well and good. In his pre-occupation with the vision, however, he loses touch with the reality that makes nonsense of all his theories of libertarianism, the reality of private land monopoly. Grateful as I am for much of Mr. Read's stimulating book, I regret that it is necessary to suggest that, at the very least, he should acquaint himself with Ricardo's "Law of Rent." It would of course be much more to the point if he were to read the works of Herbert Spencer, Patrick Edward Dove and Henry George, of whom, one must assume from his book, he has not even heard.

BOOK REVIEW



History in a Vacuum

By G. BUNYAN

The Economic History of World Population
by CARLO CIPOLLA (Pelican, 3s. 6d.).

THE author of this compact little book, itself a most useful reference work for students, is a 40-year-old Italian-born Professor of Economic history at Turin University and the University of California. He is the author also of several books on the theory of money and kindred