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FREEDOM IS

AS

FREEDOM DOES

*by*

SIDNEY J. ABELSON

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By Sidney J. Abelson

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## FREEDOM IS AS FREEDOM DOES

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By SIDNEY J. ABELSON

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*"It is vain, Sir," exclaimed Patrick Henry, "to extenuate the matter. Gentlemen may cry, Peace, Peace! — but there is no peace."*

HOW fitting it is today to paraphrase Patrick Henry's impassioned plea for action: *Gentlemen may cry Freedom, Freedom! — but there is no freedom.* Certainly there is not much of it in most of the world.

And yet, according to the alleged objectives of every political ideology, nothing has been sought more ardently and more assiduously than human freedom. Why has mankind failed to liberate itself? The answer lies to a large extent in its failure to understand the essential nature of freedom.

Throughout the ages freedom has been such a rarity that the common man has come to look upon it as a luxury; while philosophers and politicians too often treat it as a convenient abstraction. But the truth is, as analysis will reveal, freedom is a *functional* necessity in the scheme of social progress. Far from being a luxury to be enjoyed as the end-result of progress, it is the very soul of progress itself; and indeed without freedom there can be no enduring progress.

The purpose of this essay is to examine briefly the *functional* operation of freedom, to demonstrate the indispensable need for freedom of the individual as a working arrangement in any society or group of humans aspiring to make continuing progress.

Now, there is nothing more tragic in the current political and sociological scene than the delusion so

generally entertained that freedom can rise from restriction, that our liberties depend on a benign or all-wise government acting as custodian of those responsibilities which are by every law of nature obligations of the individual. In this delusion has been found a common meeting ground for every form of totalitarianism, well- or evil-intentioned; and in this seeming agreement on a basic idea those who should be antagonists too often fail to recognize their points of difference: lambs are willy-nilly lying down with lions. And all because the "right" and the "left" alike have accepted freedom as an end instead of a means; a goal rather than a method; a result rather than a cause.

Let us examine this dangerous delusion in one of its extreme manifestations.

It is a Communist dogma that "the ends justify the means." That is, if what you seek to accomplish is worthy enough, it does not matter how unworthy are the methods you use. In fact, "worthiness" and "unworthiness" are determined, not by categorical principle, but by effectiveness in achieving the given end which is assumed to have worthiness beyond all other values.

This line of reasoning assumes two separate existences, so to speak, for ends and means. The ends are one thing; the means another. The presumption follows that a given end might be achieved through a choice of means. For example, a state of individual freedom conceivably might be reached through a stage of collective restrictions on the individual. Thus, it is not necessary to *practice* freedom in order to achieve a society in which freedom prevails.

Such reasoning flouts all human experience. In science, in industry, in the political life of a people, in the development of character — throughout all the observable activity of mankind — it is evident that cause and effect are but two facets of the same thing.

The way you do something is the way it turns out. The means you use are but the ends you seek — in a stage of development. The road to freedom is freedom itself. In the nature of things, you can gain freedom as an end only by using freedom as a means.

## I

Our task, then, in seeking to fashion a community of free men is to provide freedom *now* — *at once*; not in terms of a promise for some indefinite future, but as an actuality to be enjoyed in the present; a freedom that defines itself in terms of *function* — not abstraction.

Now, functionally, what does freedom mean? That is, what is its physiology?

On one point in this connection there seemingly is general agreement: that in addition to the right of freedom to think, to write and to believe as one wants, a functioning freedom must include the right to work.

But disagreements arise as soon as we ask, "Where does the right to work originate?"

Under the great delusion of our times even men of the most advanced liberal beliefs deem it proper — or for that matter, obligatory — for government to assume powers which belong to nature; and which, in fact, can be exercised effectively only by nature. For it is nature, and not government — not even capital — which provides the basic opportunity to work.

It follows then that the right to work — which is another way of saying the right to be free — lies basically in the right of easy and equitable access to the opportunities offered by nature; for nature has provided something which is far beyond the power of any government or capitalist: a perpetually available and universal Workshop, perfectly adapted to man's needs. The land and everything in it, on it,

under it and around it, is the one source of inexhaustible employment; and by the same token the one source of inexhaustible freedom. The *right* to work originates with nature—exactly where work itself originates.

It is important at this point to examine somewhat in detail the significance of this right to use the Workshop of Nature.

Now a city lot is as much a part of Nature's Workshop as a farm, a mine, a forest, a fishery. All human activity begins *on* the surface of the earth and continues only by virtue of utilizing an increasing amount of the materials provided by nature. Wherever use of the earth is restricted—whether in city or country—there production is curtailed; but not on that spot alone: such curtailment involves a curtailment of production everywhere. If it is a mine which is held out of use, the materials necessary in production elsewhere are limited. If it is a building lot which is fenced off for a speculative rise in price, again production *everywhere* is lessened; for no materials are needed to keep a lot idle.

Thus, production which propagates itself from point to point, depends in the first place on the resources of nature and, regardless of every other consideration, whatever restricts the use of land chokes production at the source. This stultifying effect on the basic extractive and growing industries inevitably makes itself felt in every other industry, however remote. Throw a miner out of work—or prevent a prospective miner from making his own work—and at the same time you throw a bookkeeper, an architect, a grocery clerk out of work. You destroy, at the very root, opportunities for employment among every other occupation.

What is the relationship between this fundamental economic fact and the problem of freedom? Simply

this: to the extent that land (the Great Workshop of Nature) is monopolized or its use sharply controlled, whether by the State as in Russia, or largely by private speculators as in Great Britain and the United States, employment and freedom of enterprise are restricted; wages and production are held below artificial "ceilings"; and, in sum, all economic activity is either channelized for purposes of State aggrandizement or else forced into convulsive fluctuations, reaching peaks of comparative "prosperity" and in due course, depths of absolute destitution.

Freedom begins exactly where economic activity begins—with access to the Great Workshop of Nature. When that access is unnaturally limited, all other human activity, is likewise limited and in some cases, completely destroyed. Broaden the base of that access to the Great Workshop of Nature and you broaden at the same time the base of freedom. In the problem of concretizing the right to work, government can function progressively only as an adjunct in furthering observance of nature's laws of freedom; when government seeks to take over nature's function of providing or guaranteeing jobs it invariably thwarts free functioning of the right to work and thus defeats the purpose of achieving freedom.

## II

Freedom, then, means freedom of the individual; and the individual can be free only when his basic opportunity to live and fulfill his desires has the widest possible latitude. Such latitude is possible only when the basic source of employment (Nature's Workshop) is freely and equitably accessible. Thus freedom is not a goal, something that a government will provide as a gift at some advanced stage of a synthetic social "order"; it is, on the contrary, a meth-

od indispensable in achieving and maintaining that state of liberty which all men of good-will acclaim. Freedom begets freedom; indeed, there is no other way to realize freedom as an "end" except through enjoying it as a "means."

This concept of freedom is not new on the American scene, even though we have ignored the principle of equitable access to Nature's Workshop.

Thus, for 169 years the American people have conducted an experiment which has proved that in the natural order of things, "all men are created equal" (in their *rights*, of course), that they have certain "unalienable rights"; and that when government confines itself to its natural function of "securing" and protecting these rights the individual flourishes. As a consequence the entire community grows greater in every facet of the human desire to enjoy "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

In the beginning of this experiment one thing was overlooked—the need for securing by some practical and enduring method the right of equitable access to Nature's Workshop. And it was an understandable oversight, for in the early days of our Republic the problem of access to the Workshop of Nature seemed non-existent. There was plenty of unused desirable land. In spite of crooked land deals and extortions land, by and large, was reasonably available to the common man. In that fact lay the secret of America's vitality; for as long as land is easily accessible, in city and country, men can undertake their own enterprises or make their own jobs.

Today, however, land is far less accessible than it has ever been. Every mine, every forest, every farm, every city lot is a restricted preserve, held in use or out of use without any regard whatsoever for the needs or rights of a suffering humanity. Men who would be free and economically secure if they had a place to

work, are enslaved by the fear of poverty because the Great Workshop of Nature has been fenced off.

The reader is urged to remember that an architect, a lawyer, a bookkeeper and, say, a clothing cutter all use land as much as a farmer or a miner; for all work directly or indirectly with the materials of nature and every job traces back to the land.

Today, direct access to Nature's Workshop is carefully restricted throughout the world, in some countries by the State; in our country by a system of private speculation in the value of land. With the basic source of employment thus restricted, it is an inevitable consequence that all sources and means of employment should be restricted. Indeed, monopoly has been piled upon monopoly. The area of free economic activity has been, and is being now, ever more closely confined. Under the guise or guile of providing security, small groups of willful men have been able to arrogate to themselves the task of determining when, where and how men shall work. The administrative body we call a government has been converted into a directive State apparatus. The social organism has been corrupted into a societal mechanism.

### III

As for "free enterprise," we have enjoyed but a taste of it. Just as the United States could hardly be called a free country while it practiced human slavery—for "a nation cannot be half-free and half-slave"—so an economic order can hardly be called one of free enterprise while it is burdened with monopoly. Enterprise cannot be half-free and half-monopolized. Any system which is even partially controlled by monopoly becomes in effect predominantly a monopoly system, for its elements of "free enterprise" can operate only within the restrictions imposed by monopoly.

Free enterprise, by its very definition, means freedom of *all* to engage in the economic activity each sees fit. Our present order of interlocking monopolies, all of which have their roots in monopoly of land or in State-granted or State-protected privileges, sharply inhibits this freedom of choice.

Now, it has been the declared policy of the United States to break this vicious circle of monopolies, and "trust busters" have been among our most popular national characters. What these well-intentioned crusaders for free enterprise have overlooked is the fact that all monopolies, however remote from direct exploitation of raw natural resources, depend for their very life upon the basic monopoly—the speculative monopoly of land. This is the underlying restriction which holds all mankind in check; corrals them, in a real sense, into an unnatural area of activity, confining their economic enterprise and limiting their cultural and spiritual growth. The way to break the bonds of all monopoly is through opening wide the gates to Nature's Workshop. For when men are free to labor as they will in the Great Workshop of Nature no aggregation of capital, no pooling of patents, no secret cartels are powerful enough to destroy the natural development of competitive free enterprise.

#### IV

And so it is that freedom, free enterprise, justice and security are all the same thing—each an end, if you please, but also at the same time, each the means to that end.

The problem is to keep Nature's Workshop, which is perpetually ready for use, just as perpetually accessible to all on an equitable basis.

The way to accomplish this purpose lies in the

extension of a simple policy which is already an accepted practice, as we shall see shortly.

Is this solution proposed as a panacea, a "cure" for all our economic ills? No, for there is no panacea. One of the great evils of our time is the panacea climate which pervades various social theories—the carefully fostered idea that such-and-such a policy or doctrine will eliminate insecurity or assure abundance. The only possible assurance we can have of economic security and abundance is that which derives from unlimited and equitable opportunity to work; that is, in freedom to use the Great Workshop of Nature. There is no way of escaping work. There is no prospect of having a storehouse of worldly goods from which all mankind can draw its sustenance. We live on current production, and our only prospect of a continuing prosperity lies in a widening and continuing application of human effort to the materials provided by nature.

#### V

How can the Great Workshop of Nature be made accessible to all? How can it be kept perpetually open on an equitable basis, so that each will have equal opportunity to find the employment he most desires and for which he is best suited?

The method for accomplishing this purpose has been actively proposed for nearly seventy-five years. During that time its very simplicity has proved the most persistent obstacle to achieving more widespread acceptance; for the one "argument" offered against it is that "a proposal so simple cannot be expected to solve a problem so complex."

Our economic and social problems have indeed become bewildering in their complexity. Cause and effect seem to be lost in each other as one complication

piles upon another. In this confused atmosphere it is no wonder that a simple proposal for disentangling our difficulties should be viewed with scepticism.

Yet surely it will be acknowledged—and on the basis of everyday experience with life's problems—that frequently a truly complex difficulty may result from a simple mistake. And conversely, it becomes wholly reasonable to expect that its correction should eliminate, or certainly minimize, the difficulties of which it is the cause.

The reader is asked to bear this thought in mind while reading the following. Our claim is that the complex problems of our time can be traced to one simple mistake in social relationships; and that the correction of this mistake will open the way to simplification and solution of all our problems, however complex.

So, to begin, let us assume that Mr. X owns a certain city lot—any lot. (It might just as well be a lode of coal or iron, agricultural acres, a forest or some other natural opportunity.) The community recognizes Mr. X's right to enjoy sole possession and use of that lot; and this is entirely proper.

Now, Mr. X's lot has an annual value which is expressed in rent (so-called "economic rent")—a value which attaches to it whether or not the owner improves the lot, whether he lives in the community itself or a thousand miles away. For the value of the lot—the value of all land, of *any* natural resource — arises through the economic activity of the entire community; that is, through the interplay of numerous individual enterprises, and not through the single activity of Mr. X. To whom, then, does this land value or rent belong? Obviously to its creator, the entire community. And to some extent the community retrieves its equity by taxing land value and recapturing a minor fraction of it. More about this shortly.

In the meantime, the question of justice in the title to land *value* (as distinct from land itself) should be examined more closely.

Land is different *in kind* from all other "property". In fact, basically it is not, and never can justly be regarded as inviolable private property. Everything that men own—except land—is the product of human exertion. And since each man is certainly entitled to the product of his labor, he is entitled to exchange such products as he will for the labor-products of others. But man did not produce land. Moreover, individuals as such do not create land value. Therefore, men, as individuals, have no just claim to such value, and no right to appropriate it and use it as exchange for the values created by the labor of individuals.

To put it another way: In every business you can think of, constant attention and uninterrupted application of effort are necessary for the production of things having value—except in the "business" of owning land. The land owner need do nothing. By virtue of the fact that any given land site is unique and incapable of being reproduced, he can reap the gains of monopoly without lifting a finger. He may be a totally inefficient character. He may know nothing at all about the techniques of manufacture. He may spend his days in idleness or worse; yet as long as other men are efficient and industrious the land owner will gain the benefits of their industriousness in the form of rental value accruing to the land he owns.

As a matter of fact, the land owner, without intending to do so, often performs a disservice. He prevents other men from using land which they need desperately for their very survival. For he finds that it frequently pays better to hold land out of use, or to keep land greatly under-used (shabby tenements, etc.) than to risk capital in construction.

Of course, land speculation does not always prove

profitable. Many instances can be shown of investments in land that brought a loss rather than a gain. There is, indeed, much reckless and fruitless speculation in city lots, for example, particularly by people of small means; but such cases do not invalidate the point of the argument. It is the restriction of land use and not the question of private loss or gain which curtails production and throws the entire economic and social organism off function.

Now the landowner in the United States does not get off scot-free. As was noted above, he does have to pay a tax on the value of his land, whether it is idle, partly improved or fully improved. But this tax absorbs only a small fraction of the full rental value of that land. The balance of this value he retains as a reward for mere ownership of the land—an ownership which is morally justified only if he (individually or in conjunction with others) uses that land for productive purposes (which includes everything from recreation to, say, manufacturing). Abraham Lincoln expressed it this way: "The land, the earth God gave to man for his home, sustenance and support; and it should never be the possession of any man, corporation, society, or unfriendly government any more than the air or water, if as much. An individual, or company, or enterprise requiring land should hold no more than is required for their home and sustenance, and never more than they have in actual use in the prudent management of their legitimate business."

We see, then, that a good part of our natural resources—the best part—is monopolized by speculators. Hence the puzzling confidence, so facily expressed during the great depression: "We have nothing to worry about. We still have the same skills, the same manpower, the same natural resources as we had during the days of prosperity." What we did *not* have, during either prosperity or depression, is the same

access to natural resources that nature intended us to have. What the optimists forgot to tell us is that, "having" land (natural resources) and *having easy access* to that land are two different matters.

And in the depression that may follow this war we will again have "the same skills, the same manpower, the same natural resources"; but will our skills have ready access to our resources? Not if we continue to permit speculative monopolization of land.

So, here is the simple method by which we can prevent the unnatural withholding of land from use: remove the reward we now pay to land speculators. Instead of collecting in taxes only a third or fourth of the annual rental value of land as at present, the community should collect the *full* rental value. Then, only those who directly *use* land (for personal or business purposes) could hold land. It would then be folly to keep land out of use for speculation. The vast Workshop of Nature would be thrown open and kept perpetually open. For every man, and every corporation or company, so desiring, could enter into production without let or hindrance by the land speculators and monopolists who today thwart economic activity at its very incipience.

## VI

A few words for those who have been taught to believe that "the land question" is a thing of the past, that technological advances have made land a secondary consideration in modern economics. Man is, and in the nature of things, must always remain a "land animal," that is, dependent on land for life. As for modern technology, it has served not to relegate land to an inferior position, but to increase greatly the need for all natural resources. Today, perhaps more than ever before, control of land is an index of



the extent to which economic activity is controlled. The land question—another way of saying the labor question, the capital question, or the question of freedom and security—is still with us. The answer to it lies in making and keeping land freely accessible to all. In that way the area of economic freedom would be made as broad as the world, or at least as broad as the domain in which that accessibility prevailed.

## VII

This proposal is not offered as a panacea. No claim is made that it would solve every individual's personal problem in the manner proposed by so many social ideologies.

However, it could and would bring freedom—a functioning freedom, expressed in terms of the continuing opportunity of all men to work out their destinies as each sees fit. And in a sense freedom is a "panacea"; for freedom is the most natural condition of man, the way of life that has been found most conducive to the advancement of science and invention, the progress of industry and the arts, the development of culture and spirituality.

But it is not enough for the needs of our time that we applaud freedom in the abstract. To let freedom serve its natural purpose as an instrument for human welfare, it must be understood and made a living folklore. In that connection, it is well to remember that freedom is function, not abstraction; physiology, not anatomy.

A "freedom" that is bedridden for a period of alleged gestation is doomed to atrophy and stillbirth. For every practical purpose of providing a weary humanity with justice, security and happiness, *freedom is only as freedom does*—here and now.