

The World in the Grip of an Idea

CLARENCE B. CARSON is well known to readers of *The Freeman*. He has a way of reducing complex things to essentials, presenting his arguments in simple common-sense language that cuts through the verbiage foisted on the world by ideologists of all stripes.

His *The World in the Grip of an Idea* argues that majority governments throughout the world are pretty much all of a piece. Some of them call themselves communist, others profess to be socialist of one type or another (there is Arab socialism, European democratic socialism, African socialism and so on). The Scandinavians speak of their middle way. The British have been "gradualist" collectivists since the 1880s, and their Fabianism has rubbed off not only on India but on practically all of their former colonies. The United States, with its

"progressivism," may have lagged a bit behind England, but it has been going in the same direction.

The Cold War, then, has represented a quarrel over means, tempo and personal leadership rather than a struggle over conflicting philosophies. The "idea" that grips the world is that everybody should agree that all efforts should be concerted to achieve human felicity on this planet, and that the State is the proper instrument to carry out the grand crusade.

The only trouble with the "idea" is that no two human beings have the same conception of felicity. One man wants to climb Everest, another is intent on being a gourmet. When the communists run up against this fact they fall back on the Rousseauistic theory that once "society" is remade, the "new man" will emerge, willing to forswear individ-

ualism in favor of supporting the General Will. The Fascists word it their own way—their goals are nationalist as well as socialist. Fabians and progressives are willing to approach the grand goal in piecemeal fashion. But they all agree that the force of the State is essential to reach the Utopian end.

The Consequences of Force

When force is used to make people over, it brutalizes its wielders and makes displaced persons of millions. Some states are worse than others, but, as Harold Laski once said in a moment of confession, "All governments are bloody." It's a matter of degree. What Mr. Carson has done is to set up a degree chart, which will give consolation to people who are lucky enough to have fallen among Fabians rather than revolutionary Marxists or Fascists. But the degree chart isn't going to help in the long run unless there is a revival of voluntarism and a reinstatement of the idea of society as something quite separate from the State.

The quarrel between revolutionary and evolutionary socialism is similar to the quarrel within Christendom in the seventeenth century. Mr. Carson devotes separate sections to the various anti-religious religions that have taken over in different parts of the world as the socialist gospel has made its converts. Lenin gave Marxism a ter-

rorist twist in Russia, and Hitler, in the Germany of the late Twenties and Thirties, proved himself an apt pupil of the Bolsheviks, whose murderous zealotry in dispatching the Czar's family included killing the royal spaniel.

The World in the Grip of an Idea by Clarence B. Carson. Published by Arlington House, Westport, Connecticut 06880. 562 pages, \$14.95 cloth. The book also is available from The Foundation for Economic Education, Inc., Irvington-on-Hudson, New York 10533.

It would be too much to blame the emergence of revolutionary socialism on the German mind, for Marx owed much to French revolutionary theorists as well as to Hegel. And, after all, the most influential preacher of the evolutionary socialist idea was a now-forgotten German named Eduard Bernstein. He saved western Europe for the Fabian ideal. But idealism itself has survived neither in Russia nor in Fabian England or Sweden. Dispensing with respect for individuals, evolutionary socialism becomes a series of negotiated compromises between groups. This entails a tyranny of sorts as individuals are made pawns within a group.

Political and Spiritual

Mr. Carson's history is brilliantly written. It brings us down to the present moment and his theory of the "two braces." All socialism is braced to communism, for the idea that has the world in its grip culminates in a state power monopoly. But braces, as Mr. Carson explains, work both ways. The dependence of evolutionary socialism on communism is largely spiritual—it is, says Mr. Carson, "the vision of a forward-marching, triumphant world socialism riding the wave of History." But communism itself is a counterproductive economic system. It depends on the non-communist world for inventions, for technological innovation, and even for periodic grain shipments, for survival.

Mr. Carson says the mutual dependence is bound to be only temporary: the lust of the communists is for domination. Mr. Carson offers his readers a "fearful prospect," with various centers of communism contending with each other, with terrorism and violence being stepped up on a world scale.

A Ray of Hope

Mr. Carson is not without hope, however. He ends with an odd attack on all sorts of organization, including the modern corporation. In this he echoes Bertrand Russell who wrote *Freedom Versus Organiza-*

tion and the Hilaire Belloc of *The Servile State*. I think he overreaches himself here: the big corporation is no monster as long as people are free to patronize rivals and to quit their jobs or sell their stock. But he is quite right when he says there is a hint of spring in the air. People are weary of socialism, of depending on institutions. "Men," he says, "are beginning to relearn an old truth: 'If you want something done right, do it yourself.' Specialization is breaking down . . . they are considering individual devices of providing electricity for their homes. In a thousand uncharted ways they are seeking to disentangle themselves from organizations and collectives."

Mr. Carson objects to being a number in a computer. But omnipotent government says you must have a social security number. As the computer memory banks become more and more cluttered, however, the police power can't keep up with the information that is stored. More and more people are becoming adept in avoiding getting the details of their lives into the computer in the first place. As Alice Widener has noted, we have a thriving underground economy. I wish Mr. Carson would devote his next book to exploring the extent of that economy—it might give real substance to his feeling that spring is indeed in the air. ☉

**FREE TO CHOOSE:
A PERSONAL STATEMENT**

by Milton and Rose Friedman
(Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 757
Third Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017) 1979
338 pages ■ \$9.95 cloth

Reviewed by William L. Baker

STEAMROLLER GOVERNMENT is the bane of twentieth century life. It is the trademark of our time. Expanding budgets, unfettered taxation, galloping inflation, burgeoning bureaucracy, tireless assaults upon individualism and productivity are the tragic earmarks of our painfully collectivized world. *Free to Choose* tackles this Leviathan and dispels much of the ignorance, the many cliches, and the persistent myths which envelop the welfare state. Author of a growing shelf of free market books and monetary treatises, Milton Friedman brings to his latest task the rarefied prestige of the Nobel Prize, a formidable array of mental tools and academic skills. Mrs. Friedman is a scholar in her own right.

Essentially, the Friedmans tell us that the market economy is indispensable to a free society. It is the free market which generates maximum production and provides the means for every other liberty. As an aid in convincing recalcitrant readers, the authors invoke the "in-

visible hand" of the redoubtable Adam Smith, whose *Wealth of Nations* appeared the same year as the Declaration of Independence ("a curious coincidence").

The "miracle" of American productivity, the authors point out, stems from the market—free men engaged in voluntary exchanges. Private initiative unrestrained by the bureaucratic tyranny of economic controls produced the wealthiest country ever. Critical to this paradigm is the role of prices as transmitters of information—a peculiarly "Austrian" notion. It was Adam Smith's great "flash of genius," however, that prices (emerging as they do from voluntary transactions) coordinate the myriad activities of millions of unsuspecting actors blissfully unaware that they are part of any general system or plan.

It is this apparent "planlessness," this "anarchy of production" of free market capitalism that interventionists and collectivists decry so vacuously, ignorant that the underlying harmony is bolstered and guided by the phenomenon of price, which in turn is the reliable reflection of consumer spending. This issue is not, and never has been, "planning" versus "not planning" but, rather, who shall do the planning? Shall production be dictated by the socialist board of central planning; or shall producers be