

THE EFFECTS OF INDIVIDUALISM  
ON  
THE AMERICAN PERSONALITY

Marcia Bressler Buck

## I.

## INDIVIDUALISM DEFINED

The term "individualism" is rather ambiguous; but Friedrich A. Hayek, in his Individualism and Economic Order,<sup>1</sup> stated that the term was created by the Saint-Simonians, in opposition to their centrally-planned "socialism". This "individualism" enigma has formed the basis of our democratic society, and indeed, has prevailed in the American mind from pre-Revolution days to the present. "True" individualism began its intellectual development with John Locke, Adam Smith, and Edmund Burke, but a second kind of individualism was developed by the French -- Descartes and Rousseau being the most famous of these thinkers. This strand of thought is called "rationalistic individualism", which F. A. Hayek claims "tends to develop into the opposite of individualism; namely, socialism or collectivism",<sup>2</sup>

The essential characteristics of true individualism are (1) that it is a theory of society, an attempt to understand the forces determining the social life of man, and that (2) it is a set of political maxims, derived from those forces determining the social life of man.

This study of man and society begins from man whose whole nature and character is determined by his interaction with other men; not from the wide misconception that society is a collection of completely isolated individuals. Unless we are born and dropped in a wilderness containing no humans, we

cannot develop without interaction with other humans and thus be affected by that interaction.

A central theme of Adam Smith and Edmund Burke was that "combined efforts of individual actions often create things greater than their individual minds can comprehend"<sup>3</sup>

This is the major characteristic of the Western individualism -- that man is not necessarily rational or intelligent, and that his errors are only corrected through social interaction which aims at making the best of that imperfection. On the other hand, the collectivist assumption is that everything man achieves is the direct result of and therefore subject to, the control of individual reason.

But the major point of concern with Adam Smith's and Edmund Burke's doctrine was not on achievement of man when good, but of protection from man when bad. Or, that man should have as little opportunity to do harm when he was at his worst. Therefore, the social system should be one in which it will be possible to grant freedom to all, by assuming that the leaders will be at different times good and bad, intelligent and more often stupid; instead of granting freedom to the "good and the wise" few, as the French collectivists wished.

The doctrine of Smith and Burke then, was to find a set of institutions by which man could be induced from his own choice and from internalization of social goals, to do all he could for the needs of all others. This seemed to go hand in hand with the system of private property, although confined by "well constructed institutions" where the rules and principles of conflicting individual interests are compromised to the balanced advantage of all. Therefore, after this introductory

study of "individualism" we can trace the two theories in their development to our democratic society and to socialist society.

#### DEMOCRACY

Relating this true individualism to nationalism, we can say that democracy springs from principles of individualism, and that the area of command ought to be restricted by law, but that it is opposed to a common misconception of democracy-- that we must accept as true the views of the majority. "While democracy is founded on the convention that the majority view decides on common action, it does not mean that what is today the majority view ought to become the generally accepted view".<sup>4</sup> Indeed, democracy, in reality, allows the possibility of a view of a minority to eventually become the view of a majority.

#### EQUALITY

All men may be created equally, but all men are not socially equal -- they are born into differing social conditions and raised and developed with differing social attitudes. Therefore, after creating formal social rules that apply to all in the same manner (via a vehicle such as the Constitution), we leave each individual to find his own level. As de Tocqueville (another in the Smith-Burkean tradition) defines it: "there is all the difference in the world between treating people equal and attempting to make them equal. While the first is the condition of a free society, the second means a new form of servitude".<sup>5</sup> In the latter, he refers to the collective society.

## FREEDOM

Central to the idea of true individualism and democracy is freedom -- a word with many meanings -- but used in the social sense to describe "that condition of men in which coercion of some by others is reduced as much as possible in society"<sup>6</sup>; or independence of the arbitrary will of another.

Whether a man is free or not does not depend on the range of choice but on whether he can expect to shape his course of action in accordance with his will or whether someone else has power to manipulate the conditions to make him act according to that person's will. Freedom thus assumes that the individual has some assured private sphere, that there is some set of circumstances in his environment with which others cannot interfere.

Political freedom, to carry one step further, is the participation of men in the choice of their government in the process of legislation and in the control of administration. The application of the concept of freedom to a collective rather than to individuals is comparable to a nation wanting to be free from foreign influence and to determine its own fate -- freedom as absence of coercion of a people as a whole. Even though the desire for individual freedom and the desire for group freedom may rest on similar bases, they are still separate and distinct.

Freedom is only positive through what we make of it -- it does not assure us of any particular opportunities but allows us to decide what we can do with the circumstances in which we find ourselves. A person in the U. S. is free to attend college, but he is not assured that he will be able to attend Harvard

University. He does have the assurance that he may attend a college/university -- within his own constraints -- here that may be perhaps money for tuition, or geographical limits, or previous academic background.

Those freedoms/rights guaranteed through capitalism are indeed those which frequently oppose socialist thought -- the right to own private property, the right to own means of production; however, we do realize such common freedoms as freedoms of the consumer, such as freedom to spend and save, freedoms of the producer, such as employment choice, collective bargaining and free enterprise. Individual or personal freedoms are outlined in the Constitution and Bill of Rights -- right to dissent, right to free press, right to religion, right to free speech, as well as occupational choice and trial by jury, to name but a few. Naturally, the idea of absolute freedom is like any absolute -- it exists in theory only. Our freedoms in America are constrained by law, environment, governmental regulation; and in the case of consumers and producers, time and money; in the case of occupational choice, education and social background may be constraints; in the case of free market enterprise, oligopolies and monopolies are constraints.

It is believed but cannot be statistically proven, that Americans exercise their right to economic freedom second only to free speech. This habit of a constructive use of freedom is an important method of reassuring that freedom.

#### THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION

One could concentrate solely on analyzing and defining liberalism, freedom, and democracy as set forth in the begin-

ning of our nation in the Constitution. I merely want to focus on the attitudes behind the writing of the Constitution which formed the American personality, also those personality "traits" that emerged from its writing.

The movement in the beginning was based solely on the traditional conceptions of the liberties of Englishmen. Naturally, the writers of the Constitution wanted to insure that coercive conditions they had met in England would not be tolerated in America.

The Constitution was seen as a protection of the people against all arbitrary action -- including and especially by their own government. "The idea of a constitution involves not only the idea of hierarchy of authority or power but also that of a hierarchy of rules or laws -- where those possessing a higher degree of generality and proceeding from a superior authority control the contents of the more specific laws that are passed by a delegated authority"<sup>7</sup> (The idea of making higher law explicit by putting it on paper was first done by the colonists).

The Constitutional system, therefore, does not involve an absolute limitation of the will of the people but a subordination of immediate short-term goals to long-range goals. "In effect, this means a limitation of the means available to a temporary majority for the achievement of particular objectives by general principles laid down by another majority for a long period in advance". Or in other words, a temporary majority will abide by more general principles laid down by the Constitution over their will for a particular outcome to a particular issue.

This division of authority implies a preference for reliance of proven principles over ad hoc solutions and that the hierarchy of rules does not end with the Constitution. In other words, because a law is not explicitly stated in the Constitution, it is assumed that a group of men can form a society and laws for it because they already share a system of common beliefs, and to which the explicit laws must conform in order to be accepted as legitimate. In this instance, Divine Providence was seen by writers of the Constitution as the ultimate "right" (as the opposite of "wrong").

Separation of powers was not the only purpose of the American Constitution, but it was to be a constitution of liberty, a constitution that would protect the individual against all arbitrary coercion.

Another kind of spirit emerged from the writing of the Constitution other than the obvious individual freedom spirit. Suspicion of tradition came about after the Colonists had shaken off their "traditions", and indeed, that suspicion remains powerful today -- it could be one reason why change is always allowed under our system, and sometimes welcomed. Also a sense of rationalism, pragmatism, and a desire for deliberate explicit construction (in the legal sense) arose out of Constitutionalism, and the fact that it was the first time that people deliberately designed and constructed a kind of government under which they wanted to live. (I am writing out of the historical context. There have been recent views claiming that the Constitution, due to being written by the well-educated landowners and other aristocrats, caused the

initial "have-havenots" division).

The recognition of a Divine Providence in the Constitution reflected the intense religious backgrounds of many of the new Americans -- also a "spirit" that began with our nation's beginning. In various times it has led to the possible misconception that "God is always on our side". It is obvious, if not from references to God in the Constitution and the explicit guarantee of religious freedom, but in the so-called Puritan work ethic (although this "spirit" is not limited to "Puritans"). Indeed, the strong emphasis on work is a major characterization of American style and it exists today and especially today, although the motives for working may have shifted somewhat. The motives of work in the beginning were obviously to feed oneself and family, and if possible, to fill the needs of others outside the family, and ultimately the needs of society. Indeed, this is why business grew, especially after the immediate needs of the individual were satisfied more and more quickly and efficiently. Today, the motive for work is sometimes criticized as being too money-oriented, and profit-seeking, but it still is used for sustenance purposes. One must remember the fact that our lifestyle is now so complex that without money, a number of us would most probably starve (although a change is taking place and Americans are thinking in terms of "getting back to the land" and learning how to feel themselves, recognizing of course, also that certain subgroups of our culture have always lived in direct harmony with the land, such as native Americans, and Amish-Mennonite sects.) Basically, we still operate under the assumption that our needs and goals are America's needs and goals -- to grow

and prosper.

Looking at the negative aspects of America's personality, one definite unfavorable aspect has emerged from the individualism enigma -- that of selfishness and greed. That selfishness has led some of our famous men in history -- Rockefeller, Fiske, Carnegie, Hunt, Howard Hughes, Robert Vesco, and Hearst -- to name a few, to riches and power. And, since riches and power are seen as desirable ends, if a man attained these by his own individual means, whether "shady" or on-the-level, he was at least tolerated by society -- indeed, society is always awed by the talents of such characters.

That attitude is especially in view now when a man who has experienced the long, hard road to success wants to surround himself with symbols of his success. Today's symbols of the good life are various forms of expensive transportation -- beautiful but inefficient automobiles, personal airplanes, and yachts -- at least one sizeable mansion, numerous tracts of land, investments -- the list goes on and on. It is this man who claims he has worked for his position and he will spend his money as he wishes. One certainly cannot deny him this freedom or absolute right, nor can we generalize and claim that he does no good for society. However, he is typically the man who still holds onto his luxuries in the face of the energy-starving nation, the poverty-stricken ghetto blacks, Appalachian coal miners, and starving (but still proud) American Indians. The solutions are not simple and the blame is on each and every American who contains at least a trace of this inherent selfishness.

John Kenneth Galbraith claims that one of America's most serious illnesses is that we are production-growth-oriented. Perhaps this also arises out of the success story of America. But, I see multitudes of advertisements every day on television, radio and billboards, creating false needs and desires in unknowing Americans. I say we also suffer from being consumption-oriented. Indeed the two extremes feed each other.

In line with today's energy shortages, another trait has begun to haunt us -- the misconception that America is the land of plenty -- full of natural resources and wide open spaces, clean air and water, and that it will always remain so. This misconception has allowed Americans from the very beginning to waste valuable resources and to crowd those wide open spaces with ugly signs, billboards, trash and concrete -- in the name of progress. I am sure the Native Americans would agree that such exploitation of the land and of its natives began with the growth-oriented white settlers.

We have continually pushed ahead, conquering new frontiers. Now we look to space and the depths of the oceans for our needed frontiers. I'm sure we will probably desperately search for more frontiers when we've conquered the universe and the oceans, if such a day comes.

## II.

Before discussing political-economic freedom and its impact and development, it will be useful to chronologize the major events in America's history, which helped to characterize public and/or economic policy.

In the beginning when individual freedoms were stressed via the Constitution and the formation of a new government based on liberty, creativity resulted from freedom of persons to carry out their individual interests. Creativity in experimenting with innovative farming methods of scientific inventions helped America to grow and develop. Land was free for the taking and a man did not have to serve another for his livelihood to the extent that it is practiced today.

It was an era of entrepreneurship, risk and daring. This era laid down the groundwork for the industrial revolution when many new inventions came on the scene, and more fell by the wayside. The industrial revolution signaled the growth of cities, and transportation became paramount in importance. Railroads and steel went hand in hand in becoming great symbols of growth of America and also symbols of business which started the division between big business and small business. The U. S. was fast becoming a great nation. Up until this time, government was expected to stay out of business affairs, but with the fast growth of the huge rail, steel and oil trusts the government had to intervene.

There were many who argued that though it was regrettable that some people were victimized by the rush towards industrialization, it was the price of progress and it was against democratic principles to attempt to restrict and restrain the wealthy from using their wealth to accumulate more wealth, for private property is the cornerstone of democracy. And, the country had, after all, declared corporations to be persons whose contractual and property rights could not arbitrarily be altered.

However, as big business did everything to control the legislature, the market and prices, opposing forces built up on the political-economic fronts resulting in the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890.

At the beginning of this century, the U. S. was a world leader. World War I fostered national unity and also created a new and greater demand for technology, research and creativity. With the Great Depression came the necessity of looking toward government for salvation and for control of the business cycle and of the disastrous downswings. Another war meant more demand, a huge production level and more innovative technology -- now heading in the area of chemicals. After the war, Americans began demanding more work-saving devices, luxury and leisure items. All this demand for technology led to the buildup of the massive corporations who had the capital for research and the patents for the new inventions. They also had government sanctions, for these activities meant progress for the American people.

Then in the 1950's and 1960's, a new fear of socialism/communism was aroused by the Red Scare, the Cold War, and the space and arms race with the Soviets. Space Age technology was at its ultimate and also the greatest demand for products the country had ever seen. In this fast race for more and more goods, the consumer of these goods became aware of the fact that sometimes he was being victimized -- that the goods could have been made safer or more dependable. Consumer safety also led to demands for labor safety and health. Also, there was growing concern for environmental protection from the pollution

emitted from the producers of these goods. This issue has in the 1970's shown a growing resentment by Americans against the great companies who had become so powerful. There are now great demands on government for protection of individual rights, this time from the power of huge corporations -- not from the power of a despotic leader or a coercive government. This is the first time in history that such a situation has developed.

#### POLITICAL/ECONOMIC FREEDOM

In the political field, dispersion of power has been assured by the three divisions of federal government. However, power of giant corporations is not guarded against; except in name only perhaps by the antitrust regulation and slight regulation in antidiscrimination and occupational safety and health. Since the "absence of economic power reduces political power... and competition becomes the classical mechanism through which a free economy upholds political liberty,"<sup>8</sup> it is logical that the reverse is also true -- and that very definitely the presence of economic power by the planning sector of our economy is a great threat to our future political/economic and perhaps even civil freedom. Even Adam Smith had recognized long before Marx that "competition could be relied upon to yield significant social benefits only to the extent that there was some proximate equality of bargaining power between competing individuals and groups."<sup>9</sup>

From this threat, the public has been demanding governmental protection, for consumer safety, environmental safety, minority employment, safe working conditions. The demand for government action has been increasing for such reasons as: 1) maintaining

our defense system is very costly and requires deep government intervention into the economy; 2) our society has changed drastically from agrarian to industrial, rural to urban, and with this change, have come complex problems requiring a reversal of laissez faire solutions, and 3) with rising incomes, the demand for some goods and services, such as luxury items, rises faster than for others, such as basic items; and the government is the chief provider of many of those basic services -- such as public education, public works, and social insurance; therefore, the government is deeply involved in the market system.

F. A. Hayek argues that "freedom in economic affairs...has never existed in the past...without personal and political freedom."<sup>10</sup> Also, Milton Friedman, a contemporary economist, is famous for his belief that political and economic freedom are means to the same end. He says, "there is such an intimate connection between economics and politics, that only certain combinations of political and economic arrangements are possible, and that in particular, a society which is socialist cannot also be democratic in the sense of guaranteeing individual freedom."<sup>11</sup>

Friedman also claims (opposite to J. K. Galbraith) that the market system serves as a check and balance to political power in a free market society. One good point has been made that an impersonal market separates economic activities from political views and protects persons from being discriminated against in their economic activities for reasons irrelevant to their productivity. And, those groups in our society which have the most at stake economically, are by and large the minority groups which easily become the object of the distrust of the majority.

Friedman also believes government should function as an umpire, "to provide a means whereby we can modify the rules and to enforce compliance with the rules on the part of those few who would otherwise not play the game. The need for government arises because absolute freedom is impossible."<sup>12</sup> Milton Friedman is perhaps today's most famous laissez-fairest. He has listed some of modern government programs as excessive -- or too much government intervention, and therefore, a threat to our freedom. Some of these are: 1) parity price support programs for farmers; 2) tariffs on imports or restrictions on exports, such as oil import quotas; 3) government control of output, such as through the farm program; 4) rent control or general price and wage controls; 5) legal minimum wage rates, or legal maximum prices, such as the legal maximum of zero on the rate of interest that can be paid on demand deposits by commercial banks; 6) detailed regulation of industries, such as by the ICC; 7) the censorship and control of radio and television by the Federal Communications Commission; 8) present social security programs, especially those compelling elderly persons in effect to spend specific fractions of their income on the purchase of retirement annuity, and to buy the annuity from a publicly operated enterprise; 9) licensure provisions in various cities and states which restrict particular enterprises or occupations or professions to people who have a license; 10) so-called "public-housing" and other subsidy programs fostering residential construction such as FHA, and VA mortgages; 11) peacetime draft; 12) national parks; 13) legal prohibition of carrying of mail for profit; 14) publicly owned and operated toll roads.

## LAISSEZ FAIRE AND FREE COMPETITION

Laissez faire began from Revolution days -- according to Thomas Jefferson.<sup>14</sup> The purpose of government was to "restrain men from injuring one another ... shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement." But even he recognized that merely keeping the peace would be inadequate. The necessity of some kind of control mechanism developed over the railroad monopolies and trusts. This control eventually was legislated in the Sherman Act. Government intervention into business thereby has increased ever since, especially since the 1930's to the present. During Jefferson's time, the economy's needs were much simpler than today's complex mixed economy, dominated by huge corporations employing more personnel than some states' population. Just as a child looks to his father when his mother says "no", the American public has learned to turn to government for answers to social and environmental problems when business refuses to act. It has refused to act mainly due to the fact that social problems are not easily quantified to be put into the market mechanism.

The dogmatic laissez faire attitude is based on a conviction that where effective competition can be created, it is a better way of guiding individual efforts than any other. Liberalism is opposed to using inferior methods for competition because not only is it the most efficient method, but because it is the only method known by which our activities can be adjusted to each other without coercive and arbitrary intervention of authority -- it makes "conscious social control" unnecessary.

The successful use of competition does, however, require

certain kinds of government action -- to prohibit the use of harmful substances, to require special precautions around dangerous production, to limit working hours or to require sanitary and safe working conditions -- is fully compatible with free competition. The only question here is whether in a certain instance, the advantages gained are greater than the social costs which they impose.

Basic conditions for a free market are obviously that 1) parties in the market should be free to sell and buy at any price at which they can find a partner to the transaction, 2) anyone should be free to produce, sell and buy anything that may be produced or sold; and 3) entry into different trades should be open to all on equal terms and that the law should not tolerate any attempts to restrict this entry by individuals or groups; also any attempt to control prices or quantities of particular commodities depriving competition of its power to effectively coordinate individual efforts.

Free competition depends on adequate organization of the institutions of money, markets and information channels (some of which can never be adequately provided by private institutions), and it also depends on the legal system. Definitions of terms such as "private property" or "restraint of trade" as applied in certain cases greatly affect free competition and have led to its destruction in many areas of business. And, there are fields where no legal arrangements can insure a main condition of free enterprise; namely, that the owner of private property benefits from all useful services rendered by his property and suffers for all damages it may cause others. I refer to costs and the fact

that costs cannot be fairly delegated in certain cases -- for instance, roads will not be paid for by each and every user, nor that the costs from effects of pollution be confined to the causer or the "owner" of that pollution. Thus direct regulation by authority is necessary in these areas. In the words of Adam Smith: "Though services may be in the highest degree advantageous to a great society, they are, however, of such a nature that the profit could never repay the expense to any individual or small number of individuals<sup>15</sup>- the tasks provide a great area for state activity.

Friedrich A. Hayek is a specialist in the field of individual rights and in his book, The Road to Serfdom,<sup>16</sup> he warns the U. S. and Britain of the threat of "planners" -- a term also used by Galbraith to mean the planning sector of business activity, which dominates the "market" sector, and dictates the rules of the game to those in the free market sphere. The logic of his book is mainly that free enterprise, full employment, social security, and freedom from want cannot be had unless they come from the free energies of individuals and when "society" and "the good of the whole" become major goals of state action, individual rights invariably get in the way, and thus they must go. Hayek, in 1944, saw the planners destroying competition in industry after industry, and particularly since the 1940's, the political system seemingly joined forces with the economic system, that the planners are gaining hold of the government, swinging laws and regulation, even government protection and contract money in their favor. Hayek, indeed, claims that capitalism and socialism are terms that describe society in past and future tense respectively. He

says that the only alternative to a return to complete competition is a control of the planning system by the state. We are in a state of in-between the two extremes -- a state in which relatively few people realize that we may be being fooled into believing that we still have a free market system and this belief is reinforced by our country's fear of the word "socialism" -- especially after the red scare and the cold war in the '50's and '60's. But we must realize that although free competition can bear and does require a certain amount of government intervention and regulation, it cannot be combined with planning in any way as to still be able to operate as an effective guide to production. In other words, planning and competition can only be combined by planning for competition, not by planning vs. competition. However, it is the latter condition which modern scholars, especially John K. Galbraith, believe our system is heading.

One major theory that we are headed toward an inevitable socialistic society is the fact that technology changes have made competition impossible in a constantly increasing number of fields and that the only choice left for us is between control of production by private monopolies or by direction by the government. Galbraith calls the planning system the technocracy -- a fitting term in this theory.

Galbraith and Friedman are obviously two extremes. A moderate view in between these two views may be that of George A. Steiner, who agrees that the conglomerate form of business organization is growing in importance and that issues raised concerning competition "is all to the good, for vigorous debate on antitrust issues is an important step in preserving freedom."<sup>17</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

In order to maintain our political and economic freedom, then, we must do some things less efficiently than we might have had government been allowed to do them, and it also means we must experience higher costs of financing through private over public financing, etc. We must keep the private sphere as large and diversified as possible to guarantee our freedom. The question today seems to be that how do we as individuals protect ourselves from the two great forces looming over us -- big business and big government. It seems that if we aim at controlling big business by screaming for government to regulate those monopolies and oligopolies, we are asking for more and more government intervention into our own lives. Do the benefits outweigh the costs? The question is not an easy one to answer.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. Hayek, Friedrich, A., Individualism and Economic Order, 1948, p. 3.
2. Ibid., p. 4
3. Ibid., p. 7
4. Hayek, Friedrich A., The Constitution of Liberty, 1960, p.29.
5. Ibid., p. 16.
6. Ibid., p. 11
7. Ibid., p. 178
8. Wallich, Henry C. The Cost of Freedom. 1960, p. 58.
9. Ginzberg, Eli, and Berg, Ivar E. Democratic Values and the Rights of Management, pp: 4 and 5
10. Hayek, Friedrich A. The Road to Serfdom, 1944, p. 13
11. Friedman, Milton Capitalism and Freedom, 1963, p. 8
12. Ibid., p. 25
13. This list is from Capitalism and Freedom, Milton Friedman, 1963, pp.35-36.
14. Business Week, "Government", April 4, 1977.
15. Hayek, The Road to Serfdom, p. 52
16. Ibid., p. 142
17. Steiner, George A. Business and Society, 1971, p. 442.

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