NOTES from FEE

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THE FOUNDATION FOR ECONOMIC EDUCATION, INC.
IRVINGTON-ON-HUDSON, NEW YORK 10533 TEL. (914) 591-7230

Civil Obedience

WHAT a refreshing experience! The seventh annual Undergraduate Seminar at FEE had just ended – 38 well-chosen young men from 19 states and 30 colleges. It would be difficult to imagine a class or group more sincere or eager to learn the ways of freedom than these, our student guests.

There were questions! Most of these questions weren't new, but this one seemed to pop up in the discussion sessions more than ever before: *"Am I not warranted in breaking an immoral law?"* It wasn't how to answer that bothered me but rather the persistency and frequency of the question. Why? What accounts for this growing rebellion?

After much reflection, I conclude that this is but a phase of action and reaction. An extreme action has a natural tendency to evoke an extreme reaction: the further a pendulum is moved to the left and released, the further it will swing to the right – action and reaction. In this case the extreme action is an ever-increasing socialism, the politico-economic pendulum pushed more and more to the left. The instinctive or natural reaction to this is equally extreme: anarchy! This is to say that lawbreaking – each person a law unto himself – tends to increase in proportion to the multiplication of laws and state intervention.

Three thoughts come immediately to mind. First, how is an immoral law to be defined? To me, any law that feathers the nest of some at the expense of others is an immoral law. However, I find mine to be quite a minority view these days. Does the propriety of breaking a law hinge on whether or not a person believes it to be immoral? But contemporary ethical standards vary so that no law will pass everyone's test of morality. Therefore, I am obliged to question this "morality" criterion as a green light to go ahead and break the laws of the land.

Second, this anarchistic reaction to socialism is an emotional, instinctive response – no more rational than is the swing of a pendulum.

And, third, we must never dismiss this matter of lawbreaking lightly; it is extremely serious. At least from my chair at the discussion table, I see an enormous anarchistic reaction to the growing socialism of which campus strife is but an annoying symptom. And back of it all – giving the movement a false dignity – are an increasing number of persuasive writers and speakers flaunting the labels of scholarship. Identify them yourself: those who deny any place for government – a formal agency of society – or who teach lawbreaking. Anarchy – unplanned chaos – is approaching epidemic proportions and is no more desirable than socialism – planned chaos.

IT SHOULD be recognized, of course, that every citizen breaks laws, if for no other reason than the staggering number of laws. Many of these laws are unknown to most people; no person knows them all. For instance, I just observed a newcomer to air flight taking a nip from his own bottle and probably unaware that there's a Federal law against this. Or, to skip from a little law to a big one, there is no one in or out of government who can reliably assure a business firm that it is not breaking the antitrust laws. But these infractions do not fall in the same category as out-and-out, conscious, deliberate breaking of the law as a principle of appropriate conduct. There is a marked distinction between a rational respect for law and order and an in-