

LIGHT BRINGS FORTH THE EYE

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THE LONGEST way round may sometimes be the shortest way home, even when "home" is the free market economy and its ideological running mate, individual liberty. My thesis is that most devotees of freedom have been attempting an illusory short cut, following a mirage so to speak; whereas the right way to the free society is both long and difficult — but possible.

First, a word of background about "home," that is, the goal or where it is we want to go.

Our economic world is being torn asunder, but so pronounced is popular opinion to the contrary that one must insert, "in my opinion," to qualify the judgment. But this is, indeed, my opinion. Simply observe: The American people are turning away from the free market; they are looking more and more to government for their security, welfare, and prosperity, and calmly accepting the

controls incidental thereto. Such abandonment of self-control in favor of state domination means economic regression over the long pull.¹

In view of this unmistakable and continuing trend, it behooves citizens interested in freedom to reflect seriously on an effective way — regardless of how long the way may be — as an alternative to the illusory and futile short cuts most of them have been attempting.

Let us concede that the American people are sharply divided on the question at issue. On the one side are the millions who give enthusiastic approval to governmental responsibility for security, welfare, and prosperity. On the other side are the very few who see only ruin in the current drift,

¹ For a further development of this point, see "Freedom Follows the Free Market," by Dean Russell, *The Freeman*, January, 1963.

who have a profound faith in free market processes and rely exclusively upon them for economic progress.

What's Wrong with Them, or with Ourselves?

Being one of the latter few, my purpose is to discover why the millions do not understand what we understand, or what ails *us* who would bring understanding. Are they not educable and, if not, why not? Is there something out of kilter with our educational methods and, if so, what is it?

What of these millions, the enthusiasts for statism? Could it be that they have really lost heart for an economy richer in its material outpourings than any other ever known? Ortega suggested this possibility:

We are now beginning to realize that these centuries, so self-satisfied, so perfectly rounded-off, are dead within. *Genuine vital integrity does not consist in satisfaction, in attainment, arrival.* Cervantes said long since: "The road is always better than the inn." When a period has satisfied its desires, its ideal, this means that it desires nothing more; that the wells of desire have been dried up. This is to say, our famous plenitude is in reality coming to an end. There are centuries which die of self-satisfaction through not knowing how to renew their desires, just

as the happy drone dies after nuptial flight.²

If Ortega was correct, then we live in a period which has satisfied its most urgent "desires, its ideal." In order to weigh properly the nature of this "ideal," we need to contrast it with the general poverty of less than 200 years ago. According to Adam Smith, there were mothers who had to bear 20 children to assure two reaching adulthood. Life expectancy at birth was less than 39 years, as against today's 70!

Then came the Industrial Revolution followed by the flowering of specialization and freedom in transactions: the free market economy more fully realized than ever before. Reckoned in terms of evolutionary time, we witness in only a moment millions upon millions of people rising from abject poverty to a state of unprecedented affluence — millionaires galore and an enormous upper middle class with the power to acquire luxuries of every sort — our "famous plenitude." Indeed, so fantastically has this approximation of the free market performed that countless people — with little ability and little effort — have acquired great wealth. Because of a freedom they know nothing about,

² From *Revolt of the Masses* by Ortega y Gasset (N. Y.: W. W. Norton & Co., 1932).