

Thinking Things

Over

July 27, 1983
By Vermont Royster

The Half-Forgotten Men

I'm not sure that "conservative," the word so often applied, is the right one for the mood of the country these past few years. I am sure we are seeing a revolt against the politics that brought us repeated inflation, rising taxes, neglect of our defenses and a growing intrusion of government into everyone's life. It's a mood no politician, Democratic or Republican, can afford to ignore.

But Ronald Reagan and his followers, whatever they may think, didn't create it. They have only taken advantage of it more perceptively than their opponents.

For that mood, by whatever name you give it, has been a long time growing. The seeds for it were sown over many years by a few independent minds long derided by politicians and weighty political writers. Even now their names are only half-remembered.

One of those sowers was Leonard Read, who died just recently. No profound intellectual, he, but a man of perceptive mind who believed that if people would only look they would see that socialism, in all its guises, wore tattered clothes. So in the middle 1940s he launched the Foundation for Economic Education, run initially on a shoestring. Out of it poured a richness of books and pamphlets to teach the virtues of liberty, economic as well as political.

Some of those books he wrote himself. His little essay on the making of a pencil—showing how the marketplace brought together goods and technology from all over the world to make this simple tool ubiquitous and cheap—remains a classic.

* * *

Read's Foundation was fertile in offspring. One was spawned by an associate, F.A. Harper, who created the Institute for Humane Studies in California. Although he too has passed on, his institute remains and flourishes.

Len Read inspired the great Austrian economist—and later Nobel prize winner—Friedrich von Hayek to invite an international group of libertarian economists and philosophers to gather in Switzerland to exchange ideas. Out of this grew the Mont Pelerin Society, which still meets. Numbered among its first members, then young but now famous and covered with honors (including also a Nobel prize), was Milton Friedman.

Not all those who planted seeds of new (old) ideas about the virtues of economic freedom founded institutions or gathered formal disciples around them. Others labored privately, lifting their voices whenever they could find a platform or people who would listen.

One of these is Henry Hazlitt, currently approaching his ninetieth year with no diminution of mind and spirit. He first gained recognition as a literary critic (I still cherish his "Anatomy of Criticism," read in my college days). He served on The Wall Street Journal before its present editors were born and was for a time an editorial writer on both the old New York Herald-Tribune and the New York Times.

Then some 40 years ago he wrote a small volume, "Economics In One Lesson," which is almost what its title states. Anyway, there is no better introduction to the fallacies of socialist economics or the merits of the marketplace as a regulator of man's economic labors.

Perhaps the oddest of those sowers of seeds was Eric Hoffer, another who died this year. What made him seem odd was that he was a "man of the people" who worked all his life as a day laborer and who had no formal education. Not at all the sort of background from which you would expect an intellectual to spring, especially one to take up cudgels against the collectivist political philosophy that once so dominated the self-styled intellectual community.

Yet Hoffer did. His first book to find print, "The True Believer," was a penetrating critique of the collective fanaticism that inspires mass movements and mass thinking. In others he defended capitalism as the best guarantor of individual freedom, praised America when it was unfashionable to do so. Naturally he was viewed as a curiosity, tagged as the "longshoreman's philosopher," as if the two words were necessarily contradictory. Though Ronald Reagan awarded him the Medal of Freedom in his old age, he was hardly the darling of the true believers in the idea that the country needed direction from an elite gathered in Washington.

* * *

Obviously this doesn't exhaust the list of the once lonesome voices raised to question the philosophy of statism that dominated political thinking for more than a generation. You would have to include Lawrence Fertig and John Chamberlain among others; and, once upon a time, William Buckley before he became a television character and a spinner of spy yarns. Mr. Buckley's National Review gave a platform to many such voices.

You would also have to include some more obscure in the popular attention, like Ludwig von Mises, who along with Hayek put socialism in all its forms under a disciplined microscope. They provided the intellectual underpinning for the rebirth of what, in shorthand, can be called free market economics.

How much influence any of these, individually, have had on the altered public mood, political or otherwise, is impossible to measure. But that altogether they contributed to the changing political climate I have no doubt.

For a long time they were prophets without honor. They were mostly ignored, even sneered at. Even today their faith in a free economy isn't shared everywhere. But no one in the academic, economic or political communities now scoffs at their ideas. Slowly the seeds they sowed have found roots, often among people who never heard of them.

Yet they persevered and together wrought a revolution in our ways of thinking about the way we manage the nation's