

Who Owns America?

Introduction by Herbert Agar

When the social and economic system is on the rocks, those who try to build a better world should make a picture, in human terms, of what they want that world to be. This picture is more important than any Reform Bill. If a reformation is to endure, it must be based on sound political and economic theory; but if a reformation is even to begin, it must be based on an ideal that can stir the human heart.

No country can be reformed by the people who hate it—a fact which our left-wing intellectuals tend to miss. The haters can supply useful criticism; they can show the frauds and injustices which corrode society. They can even persuade men to overthrow a world which has grown sick with injustice. But only those who have affection for the national ideal can persuade a people to reform.

It is our belief that the American ideal is still one of the best acts of man's imagination. It is our belief that the plain man throughout America is still moved by this ideal as by no other promise. If he can be taught that there is a chance to realize the ideal, he will insist that the chance be taken. But when he sees all the good words associated with America applied to all the bad features of cosmopolitan plutocracy, he begins to feel that perhaps the whole effort was a mistake. A few more Liberty League dinners and the plain man will turn against liberty.

According to the American dream, the large majority should be able to count on the freedom of men who do not have to be anybody's dependent, or

anybody's toady; they should be able to count on the reasonable permanence, both of residence and occupation, which makes a stable family life possible; they should be able to count on having the chance to do creative work, and to enjoy responsibility; they should be able to count on living in an atmosphere of equality, in a world which puts relatively few barriers between man and man. Today that dream is derided by two groups: first, by the communists, who say that any attempt to realize it must be vain, since the attempt would contradict the laws of Marx; second, by the friends of Big Business, who dishonor the dream by saying that it has been realized, that it lies all about us today.

It is the second form of opposition which is dangerous. We must not allow our people to be persuaded that freedom, self-government, equality mean nothing better than what we have attained. We must remind them that the monopoly capitalism of modern America is almost the antithesis of our ideal.

So far from providing freedom, monopoly capitalism does not even desire it. To be sure, a cardinal tenet of its economic theory is that both capital and labor should be "free." But this only means that they must be allowed to flow backward and forward from area to area and from industry to industry, wherever the highest rate of profit is to be found.

In terms of labor this means that a workman had better be "free" from a home, because if he had a home he would not be sufficiently mobile. He had better be free from personal responsibilities; above all, he had better be free from children. Landless and toolless, vagrant as the red Indian, his successive livelihoods at the mercy of an "economic law" which we have basely allowed to take the throne

from morals—this man has, of course, the vote. And the Thirteenth Amendment protects him from involuntary servitude. Yet his is not quite the sort of freedom for which our Fathers founded America.

So far from offering the chance to do creative work, monopoly capitalism subjects more and more laborers to a humiliating, nerve-racking boredom. The boredom, to be sure, is qualified by fear—fear of losing their jobs, fear of annoying their straw-boss, fear (sometimes) that their private habits may not meet the taste of an impudent and nosy employer.

The man lies who says that such things are compatible with the American dream. And his lie corrodes the roots of life, for it implies that good is the same as bad and that nothing is worth even a little trouble.

Among the authors of this book there are Protestants, agnostics, Catholics, Southerners, Northerners, men of the cities and men who live on the land. There are professional men, editors, teachers, men of affairs, and men of letters. There are two Englishmen, who give the European background of the problems which afflict our country. Our common ground is a belief that monopoly capitalism is evil and self-destructive, and that it is possible, while preserving private ownership, to build a true democracy in which men would be better off both morally and physically, more likely to attain that inner peace which is the mark of a good life.

We do not claim that the practical suggestions made in this book are necessarily right in detail. We know they may need modification when put in practice. We are not even in agreement among ourselves on all specific recommendations. But we are confident that our principles are right, that the

world we aim at creating is the best world for America. And we ask all those who accept our principles to join us in opposing those who do not. Unless the people who cherish the American dream have the generosity to work together now, they may soon be working side by side in the concentration camps.

There are still a number of advanced liberals who look with foolish complaisance on the drift toward monopoly, telling themselves that all this concentration of power will in the end make smooth the path toward socialism. The story of post-war Europe should teach them the vanity of this hope. When democracy goes down before monopoly capitalism, the result has not been socialism. The result has been a greedy tyranny, preserving all the vices of capitalism and extinguishing the virtues.

“America,” writes Mr. Santayana, “is the greatest of opportunities and the worst of influences.... It imposes optimism, imposes worldliness, imposes mediocrity. But our mediocrity, with our resources, is a disgrace, our worldliness a sin, our optimism a lie.... Is our Tower of Babel—our science, our comforts, our machines—to collapse in dishonor, and to be remembered, if at all, only as a vast blunder?”

The question is pertinent. We believe a favorable answer is possible, but only if we dare face our problem in moral terms, if we dare reform our life with a view to making our historic ideals come true. Only so can we realize the greatest of opportunities, and resist the worst of influences.