



FEAR and FREEDOM

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WE hear a great deal about freedom these days, especially the loss of freedom. Freedom in education, freedom of the press, freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, freedom of speech—all are being curtailed. Even freedom of thought seems to be in jeopardy, with the increasing difficulty of obtaining unbiased material and the increase of indoctrination through the insidious use of juxtaposition and emphasis.

We used to wonder how it was that Germany gave up its democratic freedom to Hitler's dictatorship, and we found reasons in "the Prussian temperament" and the hardships following the first world war. But, though some South African voters may have a similar temperament, few can be said to suffer hardship. The fact is that the Hitler regime was no more than the most acute and spectacular outbreak of a disease that is spreading over the world.

Fear of Effort

How is this widespread curtailment of personal liberties possible in a world that purports to hold personal liberty among the highest values? Are there universal causes that have a bearing on the situation in South Africa and on the increasing number of votes in favour of a government that is fast becoming a dictatorship?

The truth is that while consciously we love freedom and all it stands for, unconsciously we fear it. We fear it because we fear effort and we fear isolation, and these fears are closely interlinked.

Without doubt, in this age, life has become more exhausting than ever before without neces-

sarily being more productive. One is constantly bombarded with sights, sounds and situations that produce a nervous, though usually unconscious, response, the effect of which is not realised unless one is released from some or other of the causes for a while. There is an almost uncanny sense of rest, for example, in staying a week or so in Venice—a town with absolutely no wheeled traffic.

There are, of course, many other sources of strain in modern life besides the constant semi-conscious ones of excessive sensory bombardment. The result is that an inner weariness and resignation has become a characteristic of the age.

Capacity for Liberty

The liberty of the nation is founded on the capacity for liberty of the individual. To maintain this capacity needs constant vigilance and constant effort.

The right to express our thoughts means something only if we are able to have thoughts of our own. This is difficult. Facts are poured out on us from the cradle to the grave in an unending torrent. These are arranged, as often as not, in ready-made thought and behaviour patterns, and labelled good or bad. We learn to think, feel and will what we are supposed to think, feel and will, whether by the family, the cultural group or the nation. We thus come to regard large assemblies of ideas as indivisible, unalterable units, to be accepted or rejected, often with little or no awareness of the components that form these units. Of such are "Democracy," "Nationalism," "Black Africa," and "The South African way of life."

Individual thinking is further hampered and befogged by our cultural habit of labelling serious issues "problems," as if they had one "correct" answer like a sum or a crossword puzzle, and of implying that these "problems"

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are too difficult for the individual to grasp. On the contrary, many of the basic issues of individual and social life are very simple and concerned with elementary principles that nearly all can understand.

There is no need to point out how this lazy, effortless way of thinking in large, predigested dollops limits freedom. But there is a more compelling reason than laziness to make us cling to it.

Fear of Isolation

We are all of us torn between love of the familiar and of the unfamiliar, between security and adventure, dependence and independence, conformity and individuality. Only with difficulty do we achieve a stable balance between them. When life seems especially insecure and hazardous we cling more closely to the stable elements in it. When these are few, we tend to build illusory ones. When life is humdrum we seek change and adventure, even the illusory adventure of horror films and space fiction.

The average life today is both humdrum and insecure. Modern society has freed itself from all the bonds that once gave both meaning and security to life. Nobody now "knows his place" because he has no place to know. He is individually free (if he is white) to climb the heights or slide into the depths. No guilds, no rôles, no class distinction hold him up or keep him down. If he wants to know how to behave in a given social circumstance he must learn individually by observation, trial and error. No book of etiquette will tell him, yet if he does not conform to the non-conformity of the particular group, he will be classed an upstart, a "square" or "not one of the boys."

The need to belong is basic, and rejection by one's fellows the supreme disaster. Only when one's membership of an adequate group is secure can one afford to be individual and even eccentric. But now when belonging, in almost every sphere, depends largely on conformity—and conformity to shifting norms—it takes great courage to assert one's freedom to be different.

The organic growth of personality is possible only on the condition of supreme respect for the peculiarities of others, whereas our age has come

to be shot through with "us and them" situations, the essence of which is either contempt or patronage. By this means the individual is made powerless and insecure as never before, and seeks to redress the balance by identifying himself with a well established and powerful group.

From this group he will accept his ideas and attitudes, and he will be persuaded to leave it only when he feels the group itself to be on the verge of insecurity and powerlessness. For this reason, in all groups, and especially in political groups, success begets success, and should such a group succeed in identifying itself with some transcendent symbol or concept, its magnetic power is almost irresistible.

For example, when opposition to Hitler's government was weakened and finally abolished Hitler became identified with "Germany," and fighting him implied shutting oneself out from the community of Germans. The average man cannot stand the sense of isolation this entails and it takes considerable mental effort to withstand the psychological effect of being dubbed un-German or un-South African as the case may be.

Eternal Vigilance

Dr. Verwoerd is a psychologist. He is fully aware of the deep human fear of rejection by the group, and of the blanket effect on thought that group identification brings. He knows, too, that to deride the thought patterns and remove the symbols and identification marks of opposing groups will undermine their power and reduce their value as a refuge against personal insecurity.

It is up to us to make our beliefs our own through knowledge and independent judgment and to have the courage of our convictions, however personal. Not only within the nation, but within each individual "the price of freedom is eternal vigilance."

The greatest glory of freeborn people is to transmit that freedom to their children.—William Havard.
