

Capitalism and the Intellectuals

Robert Nisbet

ONE of the persistent mysteries of Western intellectual history has been the question of why capitalism, with its unique record in the production of goods and services and its utterly vital role in making possible the liberal democracies of the West, has been almost from its beginning the object of continuing attack. Why from the outset was it faced with the radical question of whether it could continue to justify itself by spreading the enjoyment of goods it was able to produce to the great mass of mankind?

This is the mystery explored by Paul Johnson in his important new book, *The Enemies of Society* (Atheneum, 1977). Mr. Johnson, a journalist and former editor of the influential English weekly, *The New Statesman*, is the author of several historical works, including his recent and widely praised *A History of Christianity*. In his current book, the "Society" of the title is Western society—more specifically, the liberal democratic, middle class, capitalist society which from the first has had such trouble defending itself against its "Enemies." Just who those "Enemies" are I shall come to later on. They do Mr. Johnson honor.

The first few chapters of the book deal with the nature of the modern Western society that Paul Johnson admires, and with the conditions and forces that brought it into existence in the first place. Behind the kind of free democracy which highlights modern Western

Robert Nisbet is Albert Schweitzer professor in the humanities at Columbia University and a member of AEI's Council of Academic Advisers.

history, Mr. Johnson stresses, lies a large middle class that is itself the product of capitalism. Apart from capitalism—its incentives, mechanisms and astounding power to produce and distribute—our historic political rights and freedoms would not exist.

Mr. Johnson's theory of the rise of capitalism is astute (though one must fault him for asserting that Max Weber's historic theory of capitalism's rise reduces itself too simply to the Puritan Ethic; Weber himself repeatedly and successfully refuted that criticism). Mr. Johnson finds the crucial cause of capitalism, and in particular the explanation for its earliest appearance in England, to lie not in economic, political or social forces but rather in a complex of "property rights in a body of impersonal law, guarded by the courts and safe from crown and government." He approvingly quotes Hayek's notable conclusion on the subject: "There is probably no single factor which has contributed more to the prosperity of the West than the relative certainty of the law which has prevailed here."

The Spirit of Schumpeter. As for why the system thus produced should have become the object of such sustained animosity, this is the same question, somewhat differently stated, that preoccupied the economist Joseph Schumpeter a half-century ago; and Johnson's own response to it is in the spirit of Schumpeter. Schumpeter wrote—and Mr. Johnson argues—that the demise of capitalism would come not from any revolt by the allegedly exploited working classes but from the erosion of "precapitalist strata" such as family and social class and—more important, perhaps—from the "alienation" of the intellectual class that capitalism had created. This alienation would bring ever-increasing assaults upon the capitalist system.

It is hard to dispute Schumpeter. There are exceptions—Adam Smith preeminent—but from Hobbes through Rousseau, even Burke and Tocqueville, down to the present, the prevailing attitude of intellectuals toward businessmen and what they do has been negative. It has ranged from contempt and caricature to outright hostility and attack. With today's big and growing government effectively in the hands of the intellectuals who dominate congressional, judicial and presidential staffs, we

may expect this attitude to become more rather than less evident.

Mr. Johnson gives us thirteen chapters of examples in which the Enemies of capitalist, middle class society are identified, often brilliantly and always clearly and pertinently. These Enemies include ecological fanatics, philosophers, social scientists, artists, novelists and dramatists, college professors, teachers in the schools and those at home and out in the Third World who have been inspired by minds such as those of Herbert Marcuse and Franz Fanon.

Mr. Johnson speaks of the far reaches of "the ecological lobby": "What makes ecological eschatology important and dangerous—and, as we shall see, even destructive—is that it is part of a very widely based movement in the West. The ecological lobby should be seen as the 'respectable' end of a spectrum of middle class cranks which embraces such sects as the Christian Scientists, the anti-vivisectionists, and those who campaign fanatically against the fluoridation of water supplies. But the lobby itself includes a large number of presentable intellectuals, and even a few distinguished scientists."

Other chapters deal with what Mr. Johnson calls "The Uncertain Trumpets"—that is, those voices whose calculated distortions of language, written and spoken, threaten the core of any civilization. In religion, for example, we have moved "From Priests to Witch Doctors" (he is devastating to popular theologian Harvey Cox and his like). And for those who would take seriously the things now going on in American philosophy, Mr. Johnson's delicious "Dancing Angels and Bottled Flies" is the proper antidote. Here he shows how the fatuities of late medieval Scholasticism, which so disgusted Erasmus, are fully equaled by the fatuities of the modern language-choppers and logic-whoopers who have reduced philosophy to a charnel house inhabited by intellectual zombies.

To take another example, Mr. Johnson argues that behind much of the degeneration of our universities and the general softening and thinning of our culture lie what he calls "Schools for Attilas"—that is, our public schools, where pap has replaced curriculum and mindless indulgence of the pupil has succeeded the discipline that once marked education at all levels in this country. There are, as

he shows, some real monsters issuing forth from these dens of indolence and ignorance.

Making Us Wretched. There are, as I noted above, yet other Enemies, but the few I have highlighted will perhaps lead the reader to them directly. I am sorry Mr. Johnson did not see fit to include those New Prohibitionists who, with hands not on the Old Testament but the latest FDA report, jump gleefully to the task of preventing the great majority of us from having our smoking, drinking, driving, dressing and eating pleasures—not, God knows, in the interests of saving, but of making wretched, our lives and, of course, smiting the business class. Not since I was five years old, in the presence of Bible-belters, have I heard cigarets and liquor spoken of as they are today in almost any Berkeley or Hampton household.

There are some faults in Mr. Johnson's book. Signs of haste are present—the misspelling of proper names and a clear misinterpretation of a key passage from sociologist Emile Durkheim. More generally, Mr. Johnson is much too enchanted by science, the support of which is one of the book's concluding prescriptions.

The major fault of this book, though, lies in the author's unawareness of what the late A. J. Nock called "Our Enemy, the State." Now there is a monstrous enemy indeed when we are considering the perils faced by the middle class and capitalism. I do not say that Mr. Johnson is totally without appreciation of the moral destructiveness which can lie in uses of state power, but I would beg him to ponder longer the malign relation between extension of the state's centralizing, monopolizing power into the social-economic sphere and the slow but inexorable erosion of those centers of moral and social authority which once did a fairly good job of holding Mr. Johnson's Enemies in check.

I beg Mr. Johnson to memorize Lamennais's apothegm: centralization breeds apoplexy at the center and anemia at the extremities.

But enough carping. Paul Johnson has given us a book that, in our Age of Certainty—that is, among intellectuals of the mass—comes as manna. I wish it the widest possible reading. ■

Reprinted with permission of *The Wall Street Journal*. © 1977 Dow Jones & Company, Inc.; all rights reserved.