

The Defense of Our Civilization Against Intellectual Error

by F. A. Hayek

I believe that what the Foundation for Economic Education, with Leonard Read at its head, and all his co-fighters and friends are committed to is nothing more nor less than *the defense of our civilization against intellectual error*.

I do not mean this as the kind of high-flown phrase that one is apt to coin for an occasion like this. I mean it literally, as the best definition of our common task. I have chosen every one of these eight words advisedly and will now try to explain what I mean by them.

In the first instance I wanted to emphasize that what is threatened by our present political trends is not just economic prosperity, not just our comfort, or the rate of economic growth. It is very much more. It is what I meant to be understood by the phrase “our civilization.” Modern man prides himself

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The paperback edition of The Road to Serfdom (University of Chicago Press) is available from FEE for \$16.00 postpaid.

that he has built that civilization as if in doing so he had carried out a plan which he had before formed in his mind. The fact is, of course, that if at any point of the past man had mapped out his future on the basis of the then-existing knowledge and then followed this plan, we would not be where we are. We would not only be much poorer, we would not only be less wise, but we would also be less gentle, less moral; in fact we would still have brutally to fight each other for our very lives. We owe the fact that not only our knowledge has grown, but also our morals have improved—and I think they *have* improved, and especially that the concern for our neighbor has increased—not to anybody planning for such a development, but to the fact that in an essentially free society certain trends have prevailed because they made for a peaceful, orderly, and progressive society.

This process of growth to which we owe the emergence of what we now most value, including the growth of the very values we now hold, is today often presented as if it were something not worthy of a reasonable being, because it was not guided by a clear design of what men were aiming at. But our civilization is indeed largely an unforeseen and unintended outcome of our submitting to moral and legal rules which were never

“invented” with such a result in mind, but which grew because those societies which developed them piecemeal prevailed at every step over other groups which followed different rules, less conducive to the growth of civilization. It is against this fact to which we owe most of our achievements that the rationalist constructivism so characteristic of our times revolts. Since the so-called Age of Reason it seemed to an ever-increasing number of people not worthy of a rational being that he should be guided in his actions by moral and legal rules which he did not fully understand; and it was demanded that we should not



Leonard Read, Mrs. Read, and F. A. Hayek at a FEE seminar in Mineral Wells, Texas, in March 1962.

regard any rules obligatory on us except such as clearly and recognizably served the achievement of particular, foreseeable aims.

It is, of course, true that we only slowly and gradually begin to understand the manner in which the rules which we traditionally obey constitute the condition for the social order in which civilization has arisen. But in the meantime, uncomprehending criticism of what seemed not “rational” has done so much harm that it sometimes seems to me as if what I am tempted to call *The Destruction of Values by Scientific Error* were the great tragedy of our time. They are errors which are almost inevitable if one starts out from the conception that man either has, or at least ought to have, deliberately made his civilization. But they are nevertheless intellectual errors which bid fair to deprive us of values which, though we have not yet learned to comprehend their role, are nevertheless indispensable foundations of our civilization.

This has already brought me to the second part of my definition of our task. When I stressed that it is genuine intellectual error that we have to fight, what I meant to bring out is that we ought to remain aware that our opponents are often high-minded idealists whose harmful teachings are inspired by very noble ideals. It seems to me that the

worst mistake a fighter for our ideals can make is to ascribe to our opponents dishonest or immoral aims. I know it is sometimes difficult not to be irritated into a feeling that most of them are a bunch of irresponsible demagogues who ought to know better. But though many of the followers of what we regard as the wrong prophets are either just plain silly, or merely mischievous troublemakers, we ought to realize that their conceptions derive from serious thinkers whose ultimate ideals are not so very different from our own and with whom we differ not so much on ultimate values, but on the effective means of achieving them.

I am indeed profoundly convinced that there is much less difference between us and our opponents on the ultimate values to be achieved than is commonly believed, and that the differences between us are chiefly intellectual differences. We at least believe that we have attained an understanding of the forces which have shaped civilization which our opponents lack. Yet if we have not yet convinced them, the reason must be that our arguments are not yet quite good enough, that we have not yet made explicit some of the foundations on which our conclusions rest. Our chief task therefore must still be to improve the argument on which our case for a free society rests. □