

A Vision for Free Man

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Review of *The Future of Industrial Man*, by Peter F. Drucker.
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An author with a gift for titles is always at a disadvantage. If he publishes something called “The Folklore of Capitalism,” people say: “Oh, yes, Capitalism – an old native custom.” If it is “The Managerial Revolution,” they say: “The Managers, you know, they’re taking over everything.” Three years ago Mr. Drucker published “The End of Economic Man,” which naturally caused the large body of educated non-readers to parrot: “Economic Man is at an end.” Now that he has published “The Future of Industrial Man – A Conservative Approach,” it is not hard to imagine what the refrain will be.

With some books, indeed, the single and simple idea they contain is fully expressed in the title, but with Mr. Drucker’s work this simplification is deplorable. Here is a book of some 300 pages, which is so perfectly planned and so transparently written as to read with almost indecent ease. But its substance was obviously not improvised to fit a title. Each page is the fruit of much learning and long reflection. It should accordingly be studied, pondered over, analyzed word by word, with the care that our scholars reserve for authors who have been dead a thousand years. At that distance of time they can be sure that no results directly affecting themselves will ensue. But if we should read contemporaries such as Mr. Drucker in that way, we would of course run the risk of having to change our minds. And from the endless stream of “incisive” and “challenging” books we should have to choose and hold those that can do something to us and for us.

What is it that Mr. Drucker does for us? He tells us what fascism is attempting politically and what non-fascist nations must do if they want to survive as great powers and free societies. This is a common theme, but Mr. Drucker’s is no common treatment. According to him, the nineteenth century saw raw industrialization but remained a mercantile epoch, in which Free Trade, the Gold Standard and Laissez-Faire buttressed The Market. Now for the first time mankind must set up institutions to fit a wholly industrial order, and this is what the totalitarian nations have tried to do. By exalting the state and putting forward the most obvious common goal of war, they have given industrial man status and a function. But they have also killed free society. The problem for

the democracies is therefore to give industrial man status and function while preserving and even extending the realm of freedom.

The war is of course a partial demonstration of Mr. Drucker's thesis. It is an industrial war and it is forced, in that form, upon all the participants, fascist or not. But since the only ideal Mussolini could devise is the ideal of Heroic – or rather, Military – Man, as Mr. Drucker brilliantly suggests, the chances are good that the states built upon it will fail. For the European tradition, and even more the industrial necessity, work against the notion.

Since he wishes to make us think, and is not a maker of blueprints, Mr. Drucker does not disclose what other ideal we shall use, or what devices. He does suggest that the industrial plant is the logical unit from which new organs of self-government must spring, but he goes no farther. He is quite clear that neither trade unions nor business managers can lead the way – the unions because they are designed for little more than haggling with the managers, and the managers because their power carries no responsibility with it: they are the product of extraordinary refusal of modern man to govern his own property, and their power is consequently not legitimate.

Naturally, I borrow the terms of this summary from Mr. Drucker, but I am not able to convey their full force and precision, for the great worth of his study is that instead of pouring old ideas into new combinations of academic or party lingo, it restates the difficulties of our times in common words shaped to carry new ideas. It lifts the burden of our anxieties not by promises spun out of systems, but by explanations based on a remarkable knowledge of economics, political and intellectual history, political theory, and – not least valuable – logic and metaphysics.

The first result of this synthesis is that it destroys the cant that has accompanied all the talk about fascism, capitalism and communism. Mr. Drucker shows how absurd it is to explain German or Italian or Japanese fascism by history, by Nietzsche or by... “the German mind.” He shows how meaningless is the fetish of “inevitable stages” leading to some fated goal. And he reasserts with vigor and clarity the metaphysical premises, linked with the Christian tradition, on which the desirability and possibility of free societies depend. We are thus rid of the drivel about Plato, about the Nature of Western Man, about the Two Streams of Thought, and about the perversity of mankind since 1500. Being neither amateur nor tyro, Mr. Drucker never wears that air of pained surprise by which modern commentators on the origins of our troubles betray that they started thinking only one chapter ahead of the reader. In short, I could continue

praising Mr. Drucker's book by pointing to innumerable instances of wisdom. But I would rather have the book read than displayed by samples, and I must, while subscribing to its main propositions, object to some few of its details.

In political theory, Mr. Drucker is with the tough-minded and the dualists – witness his appreciative judgment of Machiavelli. That is excellent, and if he would accept it as a compliment I should call him, for style and substance, a new Walter Bagehot. But he also attacks the “relativists and pragmatists.” While asserting that no man or group can know the absolute, he says the existence of absolutes must be upheld. He seems to me to misrepresent relativism and, for the sake of a meaningless generality, to court the practical absolutism which he hates. In opposing him I do not deny absolutes. I merely say that they must remain private. A public absolute, however unknown it is said to be, is bound to be “interpreted” by someone. Interpretation means enforcement: the absolute steps into your life and free society begins to shrink like Balzac's magic skin.

We know what the abuse is. What, then, is the use of an absolute of which we can say nothing except that it exists? And how can we know even that if we know only that? As for relativism, Mr. Drucker thinks it means anything is as good as anything else. This is not so. Relativism *relates*. It says that something is good in certain specified conditions, for certain purposes and within certain limits. Mr. Drucker is a relativist when he shows that social efficiency has a cost and that a free society may be preferable to a completely efficient one.

It is surprising that on these two points Mr. Drucker should take what is after all a commonplace view, for he is very careful in his passages of political theory to speak of *pseudo*-romanticism. He correctly absolves the true Romantics from any connection with fascist absolutists. More than that, he is a disciple of Burke. But he relapses, I think, when he entitles a chapter “From Rousseau to Hitler,” when he calls the American Revolution a revolt against an enlightened despot, and when he rather loosely attacks Freud and Shaw. Though he admits that Rousseau had a stronger grasp of political reality than the rationalists, he reproaches him with a mystic faith in the General Will. It might be retorted that the notion of the General Will is at least a guide for the individual who has to take part in government, whereas Mr. Drucker's own faith in an absolute that no one can ever discover is a worse, because more dangerous, mysticism. Then, too, Shaw and Freud figure among the biological materialists. I can only say that I think Freud belongs elsewhere and that I find Mr. Drucker himself close to Shaw on many points. And that to me is not the least of Mr. Drucker's numerous claims on our soberest thought and unstinted admiration.