
The Preaching Profiteer

John Kenneth Galbraith: *The Age of Uncertainty*;

Houghton Mifflin Company; Boston, 1977.

by Stephen R. Maloney

Reading John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Age of Uncertainty* reminds us of the famous dialogue between Hemingway and Fitzgerald. "The rich are different from you and me," said Fitzgerald. "Yes," said Hemingway, "they have more money." Galbraith agrees that the rich have more money—and he resents it. His hatred, however, makes neither a scientific nor moral argument.

The Age of Uncertainty is a monument to the mischief wrought by academic scribblers and dismal scientists—the economists. The book demonstrates that Whig historicism is still alive, if gasping a trifle emphysematically, peddling its questionable doctrine of intellectual progress. All of economic history, one is led to believe labored mightily, from the quaint doctrines of Adam Smith and David Ricardo through the sophisticated analyses of Irving Fisher and John Keynes to bring forth . . . Galbraith. A depressing thought.

Professor George Stigler has written a marvelous review of "John Kenneth Galbraith's Marathon Television Series"¹ (in reference to the BBC series that occasioned this volume). Stigler demonstrates that Galbraith has little economics

¹National Review, May 27, 1977, pp. 601-604.

and less cultural history, and I don't see any reason to replicate Stigler's criticisms.

However, there is value in considering *The Age of Uncertainty* (it's the age, not Galbraith, that is uncertain) as spiritual autobiography. Considering the book in this way allows us to touch on matters of import especially the increasing dominance of the "academic-political-bureaucratic complex" at the expense of the private sector.

The average man probably thinks of Galbraith as a writer of books, a teacher at Harvard and an occasional straight man for TV talk show hosts. However, Galbraith's whole career can be seen as an attempt to evade academic and intellectual responsibility. He has been a speech-writer for Eugene McCarthy, an ambassador to India under Johnson, an advisor to Kennedy. He has testified, by his own recollection, for a total of 120 days before Congress. And now he is a television star.

He is most at home, though, as a controller of other people's lives. The key event in his life he describes this way: "In the spring of 1941 I was put in charge of price control, one of the most powerful economic positions of the war-time years. To say I was overjoyed would be a gross understatement. In a few weeks we outgrew the Blaine House (the abode of Washington price controllers) . . .

Three times during the war we burst at the housing seams and had to move . . . With minor exceptions we eventually had control of all the prices in the United States . . . If anyone left our offices with a smile, we felt we had not done our job. To be effective, price control had to be painful."

Critics for publications such as the *Nation* delight in telling us about Galbraith's wonderful sense of irony. It is irony used as anesthetic: Galbraith's too intelligent not to know that the bureaucratic ethos equals knavery. But does he—does any price-fixing bureaucrat—see the irony between his regulatory profligacy (and booming, unregulated costs) and his implacable will to deny mere mortal businessmen such growth, such increasing expenditures?

What Galbraith is attempting in his life and art is to redefine the notion of status in America — and the world. Politics, a pinch of academic training, a gracious helping of country life—in such things Galbraith grounds his theory of value. The shimmering political capitals of the world, Washington and Delhi, he contrasts to the blackened industrial cities, Birmingham and Pittsburgh. Against the vulgar Moorish revival mansions of the plutocrats he sets the townhouse in Georgetown, the cottage in Vermont, the vacation retreat in Gstaad, Switzerland. Against the voluptuous Cadillac convertibles of Texas boors, he sings the merits of the "people car" spawned by Hitler, but reclaimed by his beloved Berkeley and Cambridge. He preaches a lifestyle of egalitarianism for profit.

Few people have noted the reactionary nature of modern academic liberalism. Galbraith despises those unspeakable businessmen — those Rockefellers, Carnegies, Mellons and Vanderbilts, "all of whom made their money by producing

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cheap, suppressing competition and selling dear." We hear echoes, sounds from the distant past, from the time of the increasingly hard-up landed aristocracy. What Galbraith despises about the modern businessman is that he is *in trade*. On the other hand, we have the academic-politician-bureaucrat, a man like Galbraith. "The modern politician now ranks well above the man of wealth as a person of distinction," a classic Galbraith dictum supposed to set up a new snobbery standard.

Galbraith, the erstwhile poor farm boy from Canada, likes to assume the pose of the outsider when he scourges the bourgeoisie. Who can doubt he is speaking of himself when he says, "As often as not, the intelligent man is not sought out. Rather, he is excluded as a threat." Can it be that at his back he always hears the braying interrogation: "If you're so smart, why ain't you rich?"

But Galbraith recognizes the saleability in our time of the idea of *equality*, even as he proclaims—and seeks to ensure—his superiority. Some—the academic-political-bureaucrats—will be more equal than others. When Galbraith grows up, he wants to set prices—he'll settle for being the man who controls births as second choice. For: "there is no way of combining high employment with stable prices that does not involve some control of incomes and prices."

Galbraith recognizes the key truth: the man who controls prices takes not a back seat to the President of General Motors. Those he speaks for are onto a good thing, enjoying the fruits of an irresponsible materialism while they regularly excoriate the sheer vulgar fatness of business-generated wealth. In his vision of the world, one can and should preach equality and become an elitist millionaire from preaching.

The result is chronicled by the liberal *New Republic*, now undergoing an extended repentance. "We here in Washington are independent . . . of the ebb and flow of the private economy, including . . . unemployment and inflation. Indeed the visions of generations of liberals have created a prosperous city whose population is completely isolated from the problems they're supposed to solve. They are a new privileged class—of high salaries and guaranteed security rather than wealth or birth."

Speaking of the Russian colonialism in post-World War II Poland, Galbraith says, "To be governed by one's inferiors . . . is an especially bitter thing." Like Scarlett O'Hara, Galbraith has vowed never to be poor again. If the Age of Uncertainty leaves "men wondering how and by whom and to what end they are ruled," Galbraith provides the answer. By men like him. ■

The Establishment's Darling

"Galbraith, as ever, is forthright and funny; he is a wizard at packing immense amounts of information into a style so entertaining that the reader does not realize he is being taught . . ."

—*The New Yorker*.

". . . this work of Professor Galbraith's is a glorious lark—a funny, hard-hitting caper by one of the great stylists, and one of the great social consciences, of our time . . ." —*Saturday Review*.

"The combination of wit and seriousness makes him a distinguished popularizer and advocate who can waltz through wars, revolutions, famines, depressions and global follies without ever losing the crease of his Savile Row prose . . ." —*Time*.

One of the charms of John Cheever's early work lies in the humane breadth of its sympathies. In a novel like *The Wapshot Chronicle*, or a story like "A Vision of the World," Cheever communicates a good-humored affection for the human comedy that lifts his writing above the narrow passions and animosities of so much fiction in the twentieth century. Cheever's is a minor talent, but

ragut, scion of an old Yankee family that has run down to poverty and craziness, loves and hates his father: Farragut knows that his father sought to have him done away with by an abortionist. Because of this and other Oedipal wounds, as well as exposure to civilization and certain of its discontents (he has had a bad time in "a war," found the bonds of marriage a bit too tight, learned that his

to escape. He conceals himself in the sack meant for the corpse of a friend, and is carried out. From this womb/tomb, he emerges, symbolically cutting himself free, a new man. The book ends on a note of hope.

As one makes one's way into *Falconer*, one's first impression is that even these lurid happenings and worn-out Freudian

Those Genial Murderers

by Dain A. Trafton

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at his best he reflects something of the great English comic tradition stretching from Chaucer to Shakespeare to Fielding to Thackeray and Trollope. Cheever's latest novel, *Falconer*, however, reveals that his good humor and humane sympathy have metamorphosed of late into something much less attractive. Affection was tempered by intelligent judgment in Cheever's early work, as in the work of Fielding or Trollope. *Falconer* evades judgment; it asks us to respond to its characters not with true sympathy but with an embrace of mindless acceptance. The novel expresses the revulsion against applying firm moral and intellectual standards that is one of the most dangerous characteristics of our time.

To use a term of which Cheever seems fond, *Falconer* can be described as unmistakably "post-Freudian." Zeke Far-

Dr. Trafton, currently immersed in the Italian Renaissance, views contemporary cant with benevolence.

wife is a Lesbian, and seen through the pretenses of the professors at the university where he teaches), Farragut becomes a heroin addict. Revenge on his father and the world comes when he attacks his brother Eben, who represents the traditions of family and society: during a family quarrel Farragut strikes Eben with a fire iron; Eben falls against the fireplace and dies. Whether Eben's death results directly from Farragut's blow or from hitting the fireplace remains unclear. Nevertheless Farragut's complicity, at least in some degree, cannot be denied. Convicted of murder, he ends up in Falconer Prison, where he speedily frees himself from the past: he gets rid of his drug habit, turns to homosexuality, and broadens himself by living among the downtrodden in a brutal prison rather than among blue bloods and intellectuals on Cape Cod and in Venice. Finally, after having rather perfunctorily reviewed in memory his act of violence against his brother, Farragut deems himself worthy

patterns have been endowed with a kind of charm by Cheever's power of sympathy and good humor. What might have been an overheated, tendentious tract—an indictment of war, a celebration of drugs, an exposé of prison brutality, a gay liberation manifesto—is remarkably devoid of animosity. A detached, essentially comic, tone prevails throughout. The charm of this tone, however, hides something rotten; it provides a seductive wrapping for a fruit that has gone bad. *Falconer* deals with some instances of real evil, with stupidity, cruelty, and violence that has serious, even tragic, consequences, but the novel's detached tone effectively softens our judgment, encourages us to view with tolerance what we should condemn. Thus, the heartless egoism and perversity of Farragut's wife is presented unemotionally as just another aspect of human behavior; she is not to be blamed. Similarly, prison guards can be sadistic, sometimes terrifyingly so, but we are not to think of them as bad fellows.