

FREEMarket

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THE VISION OF LEONARD READ

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The works of Leonard E. Read, who founded the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) in 1946, are now online at the Mises Institute. It is probably not the complete collected works, but it is all that he collected in book form. These are books that shaped several generations of activists, donors, writers, and intellectuals. They are the books that kick-started the libertarian movement after World War II.

Each offers a series of small lessons in how freedom works. He was particularly fond of taking a small and everyday object, service, or event and showing how this seemingly simple thing is actually a result of an incredibly complicated process that extends over the entire world and involves thousands of productive producers and millions of people. He would engage in this mental exercise on a myriad of topics from music on the radio to food at a restaurant, and, most famously, to the existence of a pencil.

The division of labor and the time process of production fascinated him. He marveled over it and celebrated it. And he contrasted the productivity of the market with the failure of the state, the organized means of coercion in society. To his mind, the state was the means by which creativity and the orderliness of freedom was subverted and crushed.

He taught this lesson for decades, with stamina, consistency, and calm persistence in his belief that education was the key to freedom. As a result, the sons of FEE went on to do great good for the world, and FEE is often called the father of all libertarian think tanks—institutions that work outside official academia to advance radical ideas.

Read did more than merely sponsor lectures and publish. As a matter of fact, others were doing the same. So far as I know, no one has yet noticed that he used a secret weapon in his struggle, something that made him truly different and unusually effective. He eschewed the use of exclusive copyright. That is to say, he encouraged the widest possible distribution of his work and did not forbid others from copying his infinitely reproducible ideas.

Pick up any book or publication from FEE before the 1990s. You will see a remarkable and visionary sentence on the copyright page: Permission to reprint granted without special request.

This one sentence is what made it happen. Any newspaper could print a column. Any publisher could include an essay. Indeed, he invited any publisher to take any FEE book and publish it and sell it, owing no royalties and asking no permissions.



The publisher was not even asked to acknowledge its source! So, in this sense, he was even more radical than the Creative Commons attribution license. A FEE book was copyrighted solely so that someone else couldn't copyright it, and then maximum permissions were granted. In effect, Read was putting all of the scholarship of FEE in the public domain as soon as it was published.

This saved on the grueling bureaucratic struggle involved in granting permissions and keeping up with the permissions granted. Asking no fees or royalties meant saving on accounting bureaucracy as well.

Read was no anarchist. He was a believer in "limited government," but regardless, this much is true: he hated the state beyond its most limited form. He saw it as the great enemy of freedom, creativity, and social progress. In fact, he was even more radical: he loathed all restrictions on information. He must have seen that restricting the flow of information through conventional copyright relies upon state interference to make a non-scarce thing—information—artificially scarce. This went against his entire temperament.

As he wrote, "Freedom works its wonders simply because the generative capacity of countless millions has no external force standing against its release!"

But there is a more important point that Read understood. He understood that the critical problem faced by what he called the "freedom philosophy" was not piracy. From his point of view, the ideas of liberty were not "stolen" nearly

enough. The problem that he sought to overcome was not too much copying; it was not enough copying. He saw that his number-one goal had to be busting up the obscurity of these ideas and getting them out to the public. Conventional copyright was not a help in this respect; it was a hindrance.

Read's background was in business. He was head of the Chamber of Commerce in Los Angeles before founding FEE. He must have seen countless businesses start and fail, not because they didn't have a good product, but because people didn't know about the product enough to go and buy it. The critical problem that every innovator faces, after coming up with the innovation, is getting the word out.

Think of a new hamburger stand in Los Angeles. It doesn't matter how great the burgers are; if people don't know about it, it will not succeed. Imagine if some huge fan wanted to print up t-shirts about the hamburgers. Why in the world would the owner of the joint want to use the government to extract money from the t-shirt printer? That would be nuts.

And let's say that another burger company in town started up that used the same recipe. What then? The answer is to regard the imitation as flattery, and compete in the most aggressive possible way. It keeps you on your toes, keeps you innovating, and the excitement of the competition itself can attract imitation. And who is going to benefit the most from this struggle, the original institution or its copy? The answer is shown to us every day. Originators who continue to innovate

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benefit from having their products and ideas spread.

In the same way, Read saw himself in the idea business. Why, then, would he turn to the state to restrict the flow of ideas? That would cut into everything he ever wanted to do. Indeed, rather than restricting access to FEE texts, he begged the world to take them and print them and distribute them. He wanted this more than anything else.

You will note that he was very prolific, but why? Because he had a lifetime burning passion to get the word out in every possible way. He stated the freedom philosophy again and again in every way he could imagine and encouraged others to do the same. He was an evangelist spreading the news. He wanted to be pirated so that he could see that he was making a difference.

Reading his books, you will find that he was repetitive, and, if we want to be critical, it could be noted that he rarely dealt in depth on any particular technical aspect of economics or commented much on the news. He eschewed techniques that pass for rigorous analysis today. But we need a greater appreciation for two things:

(1) he knew that the most important task of educating was to inspire people to understand the big picture, and

(2) on the big-picture issue of the capacity of society to manage itself, he was 100 percent correct.

He had this gigantic faith in freedom. He often said that he could not and would not predict the outcome of granting liberty to individuals and could not and would not speculate on the shape that society would take under conditions of freedom. But he could say for certain that whatever the results of freedom, they would be more consonant with human rights, more prosperous, more creative, and more orderly than anything that the state could manufacture through coercion.

Taking leaps into the unknown was this man's habit of mind, something he believed in strongly.

When people warned him that granting universal reprint permissions would cut into FEE revenue, he would completely dismiss the notion. His view was that, insofar as FEE could do its part to make the universe open-ended, it would do that and trust that the results would be better than restriction.

He shared this faith with people like Bastiat, who is a similar figure in history: these were two men who had a firm conviction about a point of social organization that manages to elude most every living person at any point in history. They believed that freedom was all that was necessary to make the good society happen. They were both tireless in making the point and strove to find every possible way to teach it.

Thank goodness for his vision. But please note what it means. The modern freedom movement depended heavily on open-source materials. It had an effect on the world because it eschewed state-means of imposing artificial scarcities and sought above all else to get the word out. The modern libertarian movement was born in Creative Commons and grew through that means.

Indeed it was true: FEE material was everywhere! It was in newspapers, magazines, monographs, books, and printed by all existing technologies. People in those days reported that you couldn't help bumping into it. I'm telling you that Read knew what he was doing. He went against the pack. Everyone else was availing themselves of copyright. He said no. And he stuck to it.

Did this harm FEE? Quite the contrary! It was the best thing that ever happened to the institution and to the ideas it represented. Just as Read said, freedom worked. The implications are profound.

This is all about practicing what you preach, but there is more to it than that: it is about developing an effective tactic for spreading the truth. It's a glorious thing that Read did, if only by instinct. Would that we all had his instinct for how to rise from obscurity into prominence. ■

THE MIRACLE OF THE MARKET

Leonard Read

Leonard E. Read (1898–1983) was the founder of the Foundation for Economic Education—the first modern libertarian think tank in the United States.

Awakening during the night, I flicked a bedside switch and soon the room was flooded with a piano concerto composed by Johannes Brahms. Perhaps the music itself induced a reflective mood: how to explain this wonder of wonders for my enjoyment and with a near imperceptible effort on my part? What is at the root of this valued performance that comes to me “from out of the blue”?

Think of it! The finest orchestrations ever known to man, the most beautiful music any individual on earth has heard—all mine, and done for me privately when I want it, and where I want it, and for no more than the flick of a switch. Staggering! Yet I, like most Americans, take it for granted. We absorb the enjoyment and let it go at that; we drink of the cup without gratitude, as if the gift were automatically our due.

Mostly, we only revel in our blessings—if we do not overlook them entirely; rarely do we count them and seldom do we try to account for them. As to the musical miracle—one among millions—not only do we fail to reflect on how it comes about but, worse, we aren’t even aware of having experienced a miracle. The sad fact is that if we do not recognize our countless gifts as blessings, particularly those which an attribute of man has had a part in shaping, such blessings are not long for this world.

What is it we have been glossing over in this instance of the music? For one thing, I—no magician—collapsed time and space. Imagine, an ordinary person being able to collapse time and space! Yet, a musical masterpiece, composed in

the last century and some 3,000 miles from my home, was mine at my singular point in time and space! What, pray tell, would Aristotle, Peter, Paul, Caesar, Bacon, Lorenzo, Adam Smith, Bastiat, Menger, Brahms himself, or the late Andrew Dickson White have thought of that! No doubt about it, their answers could be lumped in a word, “Unbelievable!”

What’s going on here? That’s the question. To bring time into a comprehensible dimension, let us reduce the 50,000 years since Cro-Magnon man to one year. We observe that the first crude printing press came into existence a little more than four days ago. Machine-made paper, without which the printing press is insignificant for the mass of people, was a device of yesterday. Only in the last few hours has there been “sheet music.” Thus, the storing or canning of music for the common man followed yesterday’s sunrise. The same can be said for “tune language” or musical notations. Prior to these developments Joe Doakes and Richard Roe had nothing better than memory as a means of storing music.

No one knew how to make piano wire 3½ days ago. Tonal variations in wind instruments were achieved with the lips; valves are brand new. The first audible reproduction of recorded sound was an event that happened early this morning, and what we now call “fidelity” has been achieved during the last few minutes. And reflect on the “wireless” transmissions of recorded sound and its progressive

Continued on page 6

News from the Institute

The Austrian Scholars Conference

The Austrian Scholars Conference was the biggest we've ever held, with nearly 100 presentations of research on economics, law, history, philosophy, and more. Attendance also set records. In time, the papers themselves will be turned into journal articles and books, just as they have in every previous year. The named lectures are all available online at Mises.org and YouTube.com. In particular, the lecture by Peter Schiff has garnered nearly 100,000 views. ■

Mises Circle

We've held a number of one-day events we call the Mises Circle in various cities in the U.S. and Canada. They begin in the morning and extend to early afternoon, and feature several speakers on the topics of the day. Lately it has been all about the economic downturn and its parallels in history. These events are sponsored by local individuals and groups, and they provide an opportunity for fans of the Mises Institute's work to bring others who are being introduced for the first time.

The name Mises Circle comes from Mises's own experience in interwar Vienna. He established a group that met outside official academic channels to discuss challenging issues of the day. They debated and discussed, then went to dinner, and ended up in the coffee houses until late hours. It was a formative experience for an entire generation. We hope that our meetings provide a sample of some of that spirit. ■



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- THE MISES CIRCLE IN HOUSTON
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January 24, 2010 • Hilton Post Oak

Continued from page 4

development beginning this day and continuing to the present moment.

I have, in the above, mentioned only suggestive milestones—a few among thousands—that, taken together, have made a magician of me in an area where I know next to nothing: by the mere flick of a switch I collapsed time and space, permitting a private audience with the finest music known to man.

Bear in mind that this magic is but an isolated instance among countless others. For example, I am writing this copy on an electric typewriter. The antecedents of this phenomenon defy one's imagination, going back, as they do, to the Paleozoic period and the decomposition of vegetable matter, and the formation of coal: works of nature. Then the works of man: mining the coal for fuel and steam, the making of engines and dynamos and transmission lines. Take this mechanical marvel itself: Nature and man working together, converting decayed vegetation of millions of years ago into a writing machine for my use! What fantastic creativity at work! What a remarkable conversion of potential energy into flowing, useful, kinetic energy!

For the most part, we make no effort to account for these miracles by which we live or, if we do, we settle for some oversimplified answers which must, perforce, fall far short of accuracy. We conclude, for instance, that Johann Gutenberg invented the printing press, James Watt the steam engine, Robert Fulton the steamboat, Guglielmo Marconi the wireless, Alexander Graham Bell the telephone,

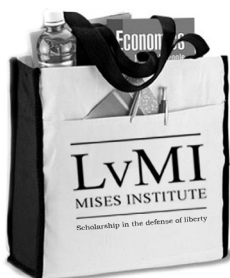
Thomas Alva Edison the phonograph, and so on. We have a slipshod tendency to personalize phenomena as did the ancients who ascribed the quality of gods to forces that baffled them and gave names to the gods they contrived. Like them, we look for heroes and name them inventors. But this explains little or nothing. And, no doubt, these individuals thought of themselves as the creators of the artifacts linked with their names. Most of us find little difficulty in taking more credit for originality than the facts warrant.

The power of creative energies to manifest themselves in the face of man-made obstacles accounts for the progress we observe even when the worst elements in society get on top. But these worst people and their numerous inanities, by themselves, are incapable of putting a crimp in evolution. The danger is that millions of people, observing progress and human intervention proceeding simultaneously, are tempted to correlate the two and, thus, regard the foolish actions as the cause of the progress. They may fail to see that the progress is in spite of the obstruction. In such situations the destructive forces become so overpowering that whole civilizations decline and fall. Historically speaking, the setbacks are temporary, but who wants to be an accomplice to evolutionary setbacks?

To avoid such disaster, we must know the nature of the evil forces. ■

This essay is excerpted from under the title "The Miracles by Which We Live," delivered as the Commencement Address, Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, Michigan, on June 11, 1965.

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