

# Grand Street Never Dies

*Frank Chodorov*

Any mortal bearing The Truth may be right,  
but it is best to be cautious and skeptical

TOO BAD you never knew the Grand Street "coffee saloon"; it was quite an institution before World War I. The coffee served was mostly milk — or it might be tea with lemon, served in a glass — but the chunk of sponge cake which came with it was quite liberal and filling. The cost was a dime, and thrown in free gratis, whether you liked it or not, was a dissertation on Truth. You always got it, in polysyllabic dosage, from some co-customer who had established himself as the Custodian of Truth in this particular "coffee saloon."

Grand Street, on New York's Lower East Side, was no mere thoroughfare; it was the symbol of an era. Before Tovarisch Lenin had himself boxcarred into dictatorship over the proletariat, and thence into mummified immortality, Grand Street typified the eternal search for the Absolute — the Holy Grail containing the positive specific of the Good Society. In one "coffee saloon" the Sir Galahad of dialectical materialism would dilate on

its inevitability to those who were already convinced of it, while next door a Knight of Kropotkin would diagnose the case for "direct action." Each eating place had its own philosophy — which was the Only Truth in every case — giving the impression that the philosophy and not the food was its stock in trade.

Characteristic of the Grand Street era was the certainty of each protagonist that only his doctrine was on the side of the angels, that all others were frauds, to say the least. Objectivity was looked down upon as a weakness of character, and questioning was regarded as a manifest expression of innate sinfulness. All of which gave life exhilaration and charm. People who are sure of themselves — downright sure — are always exciting. It is only when they abandon argument and proceed to "do something about it" that they become dull. In the Grand Street days, there was a lot of talk about action; but you got the impression

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that for these delightful exponents of Truth, action would be the most distasteful thing in the world. They enjoyed talking too much. Action does to a philosophy what a kitchen does to a beautiful woman, and then there is nothing to talk about. Action ruined Grand Street.

EVERY DOCTRINAIRE dreams of “doing something about it” — of demonstrating his Truth in the field of human affairs. If only he could try it out! There is no question that the Good Society is guaranteed by his mosaic of words, for he has checked and cross-checked it at every point and nowhere has he found a logical leak. It must work. It is Truth. The obstinacy of selfish, ignorant, and sinful people who deny it is all that stands between the cure-all and the sick world.

Well, something was done about it in Moscow. To be historically exact, Grand Street, the era of dreams and discussion, was murdered on the battlefields of World War I; for there was nothing to palaver about after the Brest-Litovsk Treaty. The time for action had come. Truth would now prove itself.

Thirty-eight years of experience have somewhat diluted the Truth according to Marx; the promise of Grand Street has not been fulfilled, for Moscow seems to have

fallen short of the expected Eden. Evidently there was a flaw in the mosaic.

When we go back over the argument, applying the Moscow experience to it, we find that the neglected and defective element in it is the Human Being. The basic assumption of the Moscow Truth is that the Human Being is absolutely and indefinitely malleable. There is nothing in him that can resist the force of environmental influences. When he is fitted into the Ideal Mold, the institutional pattern of Truth, he will come out the Ideal Man. He is the putty, not the sculptor.

From this assumption follows another, which is never expressed but always implied. And that is that some Sculptor of Society is needed. Who shall fill the bill? Quite obviously, one whose capacity for understanding Truth automatically raises him above the level of Human Being. He is something special, endowed with gifts that are denied the run-of-the-mill anthropoid, picked by nature to do the work of Truth. His anointment both qualifies him and places upon him the obligation to “do something about it.”

THESE TWO assumptions, absolutely necessary to make the Truth stand up, tend to show up its deficiency when put to the test. At

Moscow, the Absolute Truth met its comeuppance simply because the Sculptors did not measure up to the assumption of infallibility, while the Human Being denied the assumption as to his plasticity.

The Sculptors themselves proved to be incapable of shedding the inadequacies which the Human Being was supposed to shed in the ideal environment chiseled out by the Sculptors. They themselves demanded special privileges and advantages over their fellow men, including their fellow Sculptors. So did the Human Being! He was not malleable to the decrees and edicts of the Sculptors, at least not in his inclination to hold on to what he produced. The Human Being proved it by lying down on the job when his claim to property was denied. And the Sculptors lost all their lofty pretensions simply because their resignation from the human race was not accepted. They too were Human Beings, after all.

THE SPIRIT of Grand Street lingered on after World War I, even though sickish and apologetic, and kept crackling that "something ought to be done about it." Between wars, the Truth underwent some alterations, in the light of its European experience; and its perfection was undertaken by the intellectuals — including many college professors. Statistics replaced coffee-and-

cake. But the intellectuals held onto the two assumptions that had defied Truth; that was necessary, for if it is recognized for a moment that the Human Being is endowed with implacable instincts, or that the oracles of the Good Society may be in error, how can one make "progress"?

After World War II, when the consequent confusion gave them the opportunity to "do something about it," the Park Avenue successors to Grand Street set up their refurbished versions of Truth in London and Washington. For the selfsame reason that Truth failed in Moscow, Rome, and Berlin, it is proving itself quite fallible in a "democratic" locale. Far from bringing about the Good Society, it is again turning out to be a pattern for disharmony. Even its advocates admit by constant revision that it is not what it is cracked up to be in the erudite "Grand Streets."

But the spirit of Grand Street is eternal; it never dies. For it is man's treadmill search for the key to happiness, his yearning for the monistic principle of the good life. Every one of us, deep down, is certain that the "mess we are in" could be cleaned up with one application of the Perfect Formula, and so anxious are we to get at it that a good peddler has only to buttonhole us at the propitious moment to

make a sale. We are suckers for the Infallible.

Seeing how the market is never oversold, this writer, a confessed Ancient Mariner, comes at you with, believe it or not, the Truth and nothing but the Truth. It is all wool and a yard wide and carries the money-back-if-not-satisfied guarantee. It is called — Freedom. Now counterfeiters have helped themselves to this label only too often; and since you have been fooled before, you may be inclined to pass my booth with a sneer. However, if you will but listen to a short sales talk, a hundred or so words, you will realize that my elixir is genuine and entirely different from the ersatz you have tried.

FIRST, I am compelled to violate the first principle of good salesmanship; I must talk about my competitors' products, by way of contrast. Take them all down the line — socialism, anarchism, communism, single tax, prohibition, monetary reforms, controlled economics, ad nauseam — and you find a common essential ingredient: Political Power. In that respect they are all alike; not one of them can stand on its own feet; not one can work without a law. When their proponents say, "Let's do something about it," they mean, "Let's get hold of the political machinery so that we can do something to somebody else."

And that somebody else is invariably you.

Freedom makes concessions to the law, as a matter of necessity, but always with the reluctance of a child taking castor oil. It should be obvious that a free society is one in which the law concerns itself with minimizing the interferences of men in one another's affairs, and never presumes to intervene in their daily lives; which stamps Freedom as quite unlike the various reforms that are being peddled on any "Grand Street." Every one of them is labeled with "legal directions for taking," while Freedom is not even bottled.

Freedom is essentially a condition of inequality, not equality. It recognizes as a fact of nature the structural differences inherent in man — in temperament, character, and capacity—and it respects those differences. We are not alike and no law can make us so. Parenthetically, what a stale and uninteresting world this would be if perfect equality prevailed! When you seek the taproot of reform movements, you find an urgency to eradicate these innate differences and to make all men equal; in practice, this means the leveling-off of the more capable to the mediocrity of the average. That is not Freedom.

WE MUST NOT, however, be too hard on the spirit of reform; for

the impulse of reform usually is to root out envy, cupidity, and ignorance. But experience has shown that the law is ineffective in that purpose; that the law is in fact the instrument by which these evils are frequently imposed upon everyone within a society.

The necessary reforms will come of themselves, automatically, when

we learn to assume the responsibility for our own behavior. That is Freedom. Then we will ask no favors and seek no advantages over our neighbors. We will get along with the capacities with which nature has endowed us and make the best of it. In the final analysis, Freedom is an individual experience.

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## Welfare State And The Eskimos

A few years back, a story came out of Florida which related the difficulties the seagulls around one of the shrimping towns were having.

It was reported that the shrimp boats had stopped going to that particular port and the seagulls were in a bad way because there were no more discarded shrimp to feed upon. The older gulls had forgotten how to forage for themselves and the younger gulls had never learned, so all of them were starving.

This story was widely used as an illustration of the dangers of the welfare state, and some commentators even said that it proved that all social welfare was bad.

Possibly it was only an allegory. But it can happen to people, as our Mr. McKenna tells us from Ottawa in his report of the effect of the welfare state programs on the Eskimos. There aren't any fables in his story.

The fact showed that the Eskimos aren't hunting seals or fishing like they used to. They are eating flapjacks now instead of the meat and oils of their catches which gave them the proteins and vitamins they needed. So their resistance has been lowered, and they are more susceptible to diseases they pick up from the white man at the trading posts where they get their government payments. And they are dying off. The 1941 census — taken before welfare handouts began — showed 13,000 Eskimos living in the Canadian Arctic. The 1951 census showed only 8,000.

A government report admits: "The cumulative effect of government aid such as family allowances and old age and blind pensions has made the Eskimos aware of the fact that they now have two sources of income. Their independence has been weakened in some areas by the knowledge that government agencies will come to their assistance and that there is little need to take the risks of obtaining the produce of the land."

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# A Horse, A Stag, And Liberty

*Aesop & Horace*

## **Aesop said:**

“A horse and a stag, feeding together in a rich meadow, began fighting over which should have the best grass. The stag with his sharp horns got the better of the horse. So the horse asked the help of man. And man agreed, but suggested that his help might be more effective if he were permitted to ride the horse and guide him as he thought best. So the horse permitted man to put a saddle on his back and a bridle on his head. Thus they drove the stag from the meadow. But when the horse asked man to remove the bridle and saddle and set him free, man answered: ‘I never before knew what a useful drudge you are. And now that I have found what you are good for, you may rest assured that I will keep you to it.’ ”

## **The philosopher and poet, Horace, said of this fable:**

“This is the case of him, who, dreading poverty, parts with that invaluable jewel, Liberty; like a wretch as he is, he will be always subject to a tyrant of some sort or other, and be a slave for ever; because his avaricious spirit knew not how to be contented with that moderate competency, which he might have possessed independent of all the world.”

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Samuel Croxall's *Fables*. London, 1813.