

Old Letters and Old Buildings

by Walter Block

James Joyce's grandson Stephen burned dozens of letters written by his aunt Lucia, the daughter of the famous Irish poet and novelist.

Stephen Joyce explained as he destroyed the letters, "I didn't want to have greedy little eyes and greedy little fingers going over [these letters]. Where do you draw the line? Do you have any right to privacy?"

Naturally, Joycean scholars were aghast. They had hoped this material would provide information on anything from Oedipal relations amongst the Joyces to Lucia Joyce's relationship with Samuel Beckett.

But Stephen Joyce was determined that his family, at long last, should be offered a modicum of privacy. Lucia Joyce had spent time in a mental institution, and the young Mr. Joyce feared that the psycho-biographers would try to "re-psychoanalyze my poor aunt." Burning this woman's letters might obscure an important part of literary history, but it at least protected her reputation from further degradation.

This episode highlights the tension between the public good and private interests. Society's "right to know" all about James Joyce is in conflict with the privacy rights of his family.

Strictly speaking, of course, there is no such thing as a generalized "right to know" that applies

to members of the general public. If there were, you and I and everyone else would have a legal obligation to reply truthfully to the sometimes impertinent questions of journalists, detectives, and nosy bureaucrats about the most intimate aspects of our lives. Stephen Joyce could have been fined or jailed for destroying his own private property, on the grounds that others, or "history," had a proprietary interest.

Similar conflicts over property rights arise in other areas. For example, consider the case of historical landmarks. Although not a direct analogy—there is no issue of privacy involved—whenever the owner of an historical edifice decides to renovate or demolish it, he places his interest against that of society at large. Old letters, and old buildings too, are replete with historical significance. If we can label some of the latter as landmarks, and refuse to allow the owner to destroy them, can we not decide that some individuals are of such historical importance that no one may destroy their papers and other artifacts?

If we did so, society in effect would be asserting that it, and not the famous person in question, is the rightful owner of the product of his labors. Evidently, not many would hold that we have the right to interfere with people's property rights in their letters. How is it then that we regularly interfere with their right to dispose of their own physical property—so-called historical landmarks? Something to think about. □

Dr. Block is a Senior Research Fellow at The Fraser Institute, Vancouver, British Columbia.

Ecology, Socialism, and Capitalism

by Tibor R. Machan

The socialist—or, more generally, the collectivist—economic system has fallen into disrepute. Theoretically there were hints of this as far back as the 4th century B.C. when Aristotle observed in his *Politics* that private ownership of property encourages responsible human behavior more readily than does collectivism (as spelled out in Plato's *Republic*). Aristotle said, "That all persons call the same thing mine in the sense in which each does so may be a fine thing, but it is impracticable; or if the words are taken in the other sense, such a unity in no way conduces to harmony. And there is another objection to the proposal. For that which is common to the greatest number has the least care bestowed upon it. Every one thinks chiefly of his own, hardly at all of the common interest; and only when he is himself concerned as an individual. For besides other considerations, everybody is more inclined to neglect the duty which he expects another to fulfill; as in families many attendants are often less useful than a few."

In our time, Ludwig von Mises advanced the same general observation in more technical and rigorous terms in his book *Socialism*, although he was mainly concerned with economic problems of production and allocation of resources for satisfying individual preferences. More recently, however, Garrett Hardin, in his famous essay "The Tragedy of the Commons," argued that the difficulties first noticed by Aristotle plague us in the quintessential public realm, the ecological environment.

Tibor R. Machan teaches philosophy at Auburn University, Alabama. His most recent book, Capitalism and Individualism, was published by St. Martin's Press in October.

These various indictments of collectivism, coupled with the few moral arguments against it, didn't dissuade many intellectuals from attempting to implement the system. Our own century is filled with enthusiastic, stubborn, visionary, opportunistic, but almost always bloody efforts to realize the collectivist dream. Not until the crumbling of the Soviet attempt did it dawn on most people that collectivism is simply not going to do the job of enabling people to live a decent human social life. Although most admit that in small units—convents, kibbutzim, the family—a limited, temporary collectivist arrangement may be feasible, they no longer look with much hope toward transforming entire societies into collectivist human organizations.

The most recent admission of the failure of collectivism—in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet-bloc economies—comes from Robert Heilbroner, one of socialism's most intelligent and loyal champions for the last several decades. As he puts it in his recent essay, "After Communism," "Ludwig von Mises . . . had written of the 'impossibility' of socialism, arguing that no Central Planning Board could ever gather the enormous amount of information needed to create a workable economic system. . . . It turns out, of course, that Mises was right. . . ." (*The New Yorker*, September 10, 1990)

But, not unlike previous thinkers who have seen examples of the failure of some kind of perfectionist, idealist normative moral or political scheme, Professor Heilbroner cannot quite say goodbye to his utopia. He notes that there are two ways it may remain something of a handy concept. First, it may leave us piecemeal social objectives to strive