

Frank Chodorov: Individualist

di Murray N. Rothbard

At the end of 1966, two coincidental but symbolically intertwined “deaths” struck a blow to every lover of liberty: the far more grievous actual death of Frank Chodorov, and the transformation of the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists, which he inspired and founded, into the carefully (neutrally) named Intercollegiate Studies Institute. Both events mark the end of an era to be mourned by every individualist, by every one of us whose lives were illumined and brightened by the radiance of Frank’s noble individualism of mind and spirit. For in his person and in his ideas, Frank was the inspiration for a whole generation of libertarians. And in his dream of bringing to the open-minded and eager youths in college the individualist vision, Frank was highlighting the strategy as well as the goals that libertarians must needs follow. Can Frank’s splendid legacy be properly served by turning away in shame from that very beloved word, “Individualism,” that guided and infused his entire life?

But Frank, I am sure, would never despair at this kind of misfortune for the cause that he held dear. For he was always conscious of the fact that he wrote and spoke to a Remnant, to a small band of individualists who would eagerly imbibe the articulation of their own deepest yearnings. Frank was firmly convinced, though it was obviously a sentiment that he could not prove, that people were either born individualists or they were not, and hence it would be impossible to generate a mass movement of libertarians by any sort of short-cut demagoguery. But he was also as firmly convinced that that Remnant is always there: that always, in every generation, there are young men who, if they but learn of its existence, will pick up the torch of individualism and carry it all their lives. The remarkable growth of libertarians among the youth in the last few years is living proof of Frank’s faith, and constitutes our best hope for the future.

Frank, indeed, was always scornful of short-cuts, especially political ones. So perceptive was he of the nature of the political animal that he never fell for the preferred hooch of political pitch-men; when I first met him, twenty years ago, he had not voted at all for decades, and he continued to cleave to this conviction. He would be swayed neither by arguments from expediency nor by assurances that the new political Messiah had arrived and need only be followed to assure social Salvation. Not for Frank was any of the hogwash, accepted by Right and Left alike, about the joyous civic obligation of voting for the “candidate of one’s choice” or of communing with one’s fellow-voters at the ballot box.

Frank’s convictions on voting is but one example of the reason that he was sui generis, of the reason that he stood out, among the crowd of would-be libertarians and free-marketeers, like a blaze of radiant light in a dismal swamp. That reason was, above all, Frank’s remarkable integrity, his courage in being his own man, in pursuing the logic and the necessities of his own convictions, and in the simplicity and goodness which accounted for Frank’s not realizing that other men, alas!, were not as he. Frank moved in a world of bland and phony opportunists, of men who never gave him anything like his due, and yet he moved among them as one who, considering personal integrity the birthright of man, expected no less from those around him. Frank was a great and lovable man, and the world is a far poorer place without him. We shall not see his like again. But at the very least, we can treasure the memory of having known him as a man, and hold high and aloft the banner of his convictions, and of his books and essays. Perhaps then we shall be worthy of having called him friend.