

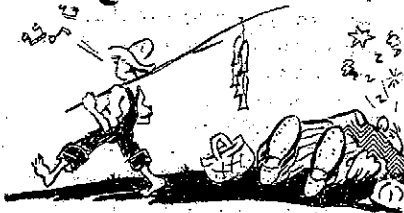
Society Cannot Live By Robbery

By HARRY GUNNISON BROWN

No society has completely eliminated exploitation or parasitism even in its cruder and most generally recognized forms. Highway robbery certainly is not unknown in the modern "civilized" world. Burglary continues to be practiced. So does the picking of pockets. But at least all of these are generally and violently reprobated. Other forms of exploitation, such as monopoly, unfair competition, the gaining of subsidies and tariff favors at the expense of the people through influencing government, etc., are certainly similar in their fundamental nature, although the devious windings involved in some of them may bring it about that their exploitive character is less clearly and generally recognized.

Entire tribes and nations of men have accepted extreme and essentially unreasonable theories of obligation to exploiters, and many millions of human beings have learned to submit humbly to the lot of the exploited. And yet the connection between effort and the satisfaction of needs and desires seems so clear, at any rate in the more simple economies, that we must believe any human being of normal mind to be capable of recognizing it.

And thus, though men may become accustomed to submit to certain forms of exploitation as "right," it would seem that, a priori at least, the minds of most of them naturally and inevitably react with resentment when that which is clearly the result of their effort is taken from them by others. The man who has hunted or fished all day that he and his may have meat for their evening meal, is likely to experience more bitter resentment if another, who has avoided this effort through the heat of the day, takes his catch from him at sunset, than if this product of his effort had come to him without labor or thought on his part. Likewise, the man who has spent many weeks preparing the ground, planting it, weeding it and then getting the produce it yields, will probably feel much more resentment



if the reward of all this labor is taken from him than he would feel to have the same provisions taken from him had they been dropped into his home by unseen powers and with no labor or planning of his own. And similarly if one has spun and woven cloth and made clothing for protection against the cold of winter or has made bowls and plates from which to eat or beds in which to sleep or has built walls and a roof to shelter him against winds and rain.

Is it not probable that considerations such as these are at the basis of the claim that the "right" to the product of one's own labor is a "natural" right? It is indeed natural, under the actual circumstances of life and with human minds what they are, that there should be a definite tendency to recognize the material result of an individual's productive effort as something to which he has a rather special and justifiable claim. And so it seems not unreasonable to conclude that a society which recognizes the principle that the laborer is, in general, entitled to the product of his labor, will have a greater degree of cohesion than a society in which that principle is completely repudiated.

It is true that modern economic society is complex. The use of money and bank credit, the rise and fall of price levels, the processes of large scale production with the hir-



ing of labor for manifold specialized tasks, the subtle forms which monopoly may sometimes take, the variety of methods of unfair competition, etc., may make the connection between a person's labor and the product of it far less obvious than it would be in a more primitive society.

The connection is still obvious enough, however, to any one at all given to serious reflection; and it is still probably true that the welfare—and the cohesion and strength—of any society is best furthered by a system of distribution or sharing that apportions rewards in at least some sort of relation to productive contribution.

The connection between work and saving on the one hand and the extra return yielded by capital over what work alone would yield, on the other hand, is, apparently, not quite so obvious. For communists and socialists seem able to convince themselves that no individual as such is fairly entitled to a return on capital; and this conviction presumably grows out of their view that all value is produced by labor. Yet men do reason beyond the simple and the obvious. And the conclusion that saving, with investment of the savings in capital construction, is a real contribution to the productive process, is but a logical extension of the conclusion that labor is such a contribution.

Under the circumstances, then, we may reasonably expect that those who have saved and who have even the vaguest idea of the necessity of saving for capital construction and of the advantage of capital to industry, will easily and naturally feel themselves entitled to receive interest on their capital and that, at any rate with the more understanding, something of the same resentment will be felt when others take from them what their capital yields as when others rob them of the direct product of their labor.

It is true that the habit of confusing land with capital is still wide-

spread and that the writings of some professional economists, even, contribute to the confusion. But there have been many men, since economics began, and there are now an increasing number, who recognize that land and capital are not at all the same and that the private enjoyment of land rent cannot be justified on any basis of stimulus to efficiency and thrift, or of general well being, or of social cohesion, or of survival of the group, as can the private enjoyment of interest on capital and wages of labor. To socialize the annual rental value of land would make the people of a nation more prosperous and happy in peace, and it would make them more formidable in war—if war there must be. The economic waste of land speculation would be done away with. Revenues which now go to private individuals for no service in return, would be available to the public. The citizens of such a nation could not—unless

utterly uncomprehending—be other than enthusiastic about their system and anxious to retain and extend it. And in enemy states where the system was beginning to be understood but whose dominant classes were determined not to adopt it, there would be grave risk of divided counsels and of lack of enthusiasm in its defense.

Sometimes, indeed, the military defeat of a nation the majority of whose people are exploited by a privileged few, if the defeat does not bring serious subjection to alien exploiters, may help to relieve the common folk of the defeated nation from their economic subservience.



For such defeat may destroy the prestige of the ruling caste, diminish the respect or the fear in which it is held, and so make possible a disruption of relationships that had come to seem eternal.

Unless, however, there is widespread understanding of economic facts and forces, including widespread ability to recognize as such the various forms and devices of exploitation, any reform is likely to be only temporary. Even if the old caste of parasites fails to regain its position, there will arise new exploiters who may be no less hard to suffer than the old.

But it is a chief function of The Henry George School of Social Science to aid in spreading such economic understanding as widely as possible. And it may be that upon the work of this School—more than upon any other institution or persons—depends the chance of the continuance of a system of free industry.